

TOWARDS APPLYING CANONICAL APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE TO  
POSTMODERN CULTURE

A THESIS-PROJECT  
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RYAN MICHAEL BOYS

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For Dr. Michael Boys,  
my favorite preacher and theologian.

And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.”

—*Revelation 12:10-11*

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## PREFACE

The idea came for this thesis-project came from Richard Lischer's article "The Limits of Story" in *Interpretation* 38. As Lischer described the loss of story and parataxis in postmodern culture, I could not help but think about the meta-narrative revealed in the Bible. I was particularly drawn to the end of the story. Just like the original recipients of the apocalyptic texts in the Bible, postmodern people struggle to make sense of their lives. What intrigued me was that this storylessness was not limited to those who had suffered tragedy, but that it was a symptom of a postmodern worldview.

The more I thought about the postmodern condition and the Biblical meta-narrative, it occurred to me that canonical apocalyptic literature was uniquely suited to meet the need for story in postmodern culture. Perhaps the message of the most neglected parts of the Bible is exactly what postmodern people need. This project is my attempt to prove that such is the case.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis-project would have been impossible without the daily, Christ-like ministry of my wife, Lindsay. She not only supported me through the entire process, but made the sacrifices that enabled me to complete the work. Thank you for doctorate Fridays, and for challenging me to finish in a timely manner. I love you more today than I knew I could love.

I would also like to thank the church body at Green Pond Bible Chapel. The elders graciously granted me permission to pursue this degree, and they have supported me by praying for me, providing finances, holding me accountable, and encouraging me. My co-laborers in the gospel, Andy Brown and Mike Ruel, willingly helped bear the pastoral work load which allowed me to focus on this project. They also endured many conversations regarding postmodernism and apocalyptic literature which I am sure they were glad to forget. Finally, the church body at Green Pond Bible Chapel patiently listened to sermons on Zechariah, Daniel, and Revelation over the past four years. May God bless you for your perseverance!

I also need to thank the worldwide cloud of witnesses who prayed for and encouraged me through the process. I know my extended family and friends prayed often for this project. I know my mom prayed for me as only a mom could. Thank you to all of you.

Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Randal Pelton and Dr. Jeffrey Arthurs. These men have been more than academic advisors for me, they are my mentors in the gospel.

Both use their academic gifts for God's glory, and both have a shepherd's heart. Thank you both for critically engaging in this work, and reminding me often that the purpose was never scholarship for scholarship's sake. I count you both as brothers and fellow laborers in the gospel.

## ABBREVIATIONS

- BDAG: Danker, William Frederick, ed. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- COS: Hallo, William W. and K. Lawson Younger Jr., eds. *The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2003. Accordance edition.
- DSS Index: Abegg, Martin G., Jr., ed. *An Index of Dead Sea Scrolls Manuscripts (DSS Index)*. N.p.: OakTree Software, Inc., 2014. Accordance edition.
- HALOT: Koehler, Ludwig and Walter Baumgartner, eds. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. 2 vols. Boston, Brill: 2001.
- NIDNTT: Brown, Colin, ed. *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986. Accordance edition.
- NIDOTTE: VanGemeren, Willem V., ed. *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997. Accordance edition.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis-project is designed to consider how canonical apocalyptic literature provides a meta-narrative for postmodern culture. The literature in the fields of postmodern philosophy, hermeneutics, non canonical apocalyptic literature, canonical apocalyptic literature, and homiletics is vast. This project addresses the intersection of those disciplines. Postmodernism has created problems that canonical apocalyptic literature is uniquely suited to address. The core of the project is a comparison of the function of non-canonical apocalyptic literature and canonical apocalyptic literature in their original contexts. Understanding the way the genre of apocalyptic literature functions enables us to consider how it functions for postmodern readers.

All sorrows can be born if you put them in a story or tell a story about them.

— Isak Dinesen

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE PROBLEM OF PARATAXIS

#### Introduction

In 1979 Jean-François Lyotard articulated a concise and often quoted definition of postmodernism: “Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward meta-narratives.”<sup>1</sup> A meta-narrative is a “comprehensive story” that accounts for all of existence: life, the universe, and history.<sup>2</sup> Note well the plural in Lyotard’s definition: postmodern culture finds meta-narratives unbelievable, whether they are religious, social, or scientific. This loss of meta-narrative, whether it be personal or social, has resulted in a *paratactic*, or disconnected, view of life. In reference to worldview, parataxis is the belief that there is no purpose to the happenings of life; events just happen. Parataxis, as explored below, is the result of the absence of any meta-narrative in postmodernism. If postmodernism is the disease, parataxis is one of its primary symptoms. In a paratactic worldview people interpret events in their lives as having no interconnectedness or long term significance. Everyone has sorrows, but few have an overarching story to tell about them.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massurri, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press, 1984), xxiv. Emphasis his.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Jenson, “It’s the Culture,” *First Things*, no. 243 (May 2014), 34.

My proposed thesis is canonical apocalyptic literature restores the lost meta-narrative in postmodern culture by providing a visionary representation of future victory for the people of God anchored in the narrated experience of the vision recipient. In short, apocalypse provides the comprehensive story. While every genre of Scripture addresses issues related to a paratactic view of life, apocalypses are uniquely suited to deal with the issue of parataxis. How does canonical apocalyptic literature restore the lost meta-narrative in postmodern culture? I will explore the potential ways that the genre of apocalypse is uniquely suited to address parataxis and restore the lost meta-narrative in postmodernism.

In order to frame the problem of parataxis in postmodernism, I will briefly summarize some key articulations of postmodern thinking and Christian analyses of those positions. Then I will offer a detailed definition of parataxis and trace parataxis from modernism to postmodernism.

### **Articulations of Postmodernism**

An articulated worldview labeled postmodernism first “emerged in the arts around the turn of the present century, in deliberate *rejection* of the world shaped by Enlightenment and Romanticism, i.e., of the world otherwise called ‘modern.’”<sup>3</sup> Carson and others rightly nuance the discussion by acknowledging that “post-modernism” is

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<sup>3</sup> Robert W. Jenson, “How the World Lost Its Story,” *First Things* 201 (March 2010), 31-32. Emphasis his.

one particular strand of modernism.<sup>4</sup> Along the same lines, some scholars prefer terms such as “late-modernism” or “ultra-modernism.” The label postmodern, although subject to disparate emphases, is still useful. Given these issues, Lyotard’s definition of postmodernism as “incredulity toward meta-narratives” still reflects the most unifying element across the board.<sup>5</sup>

Stiver breaks down leading postmodern thinkers into six categories and then boils that list down to two general groups. The first group includes radical postmodernists who “emphasize relativism, skepticism, and a virtual abandonment of the categories of truth, reality, and reasoned argument.”<sup>6</sup> He defines these as “ultra-modernists;” for them, reason has failed. The second group includes those who not only are critical of modernity, but also want to abandon it completely. He calls these “pre-modernists” as they desire a return conceptually to pre-modern days.<sup>7</sup> Many Christian responses to postmodernism fall into this second category, while the hallmark expressions of postmodern thinking fall into the former.

I will briefly survey some of the most prominent expressions of secular postmodern thinking from Stiver’s group of ultra-modernists who clearly articulate the rejection of meta-narratives. He divides ultra-modernists into six categories: interpretive, linguistic, scientific, neo-Reformed, French post-structural, and American

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<sup>4</sup> “So considered, postmodernism is nothing but the popularization of one strand of modernist thought...” D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 60.

<sup>5</sup> Lyotard, xxiv.

<sup>6</sup> Dan R. Stiver, “Much Ado About Athens and Jerusalem: The Implications of Postmodernism for Faith,” *Review and Expositor* 91, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 93.

<sup>7</sup> Stiver, “Much Ado,” 94.

neo-pragmatic.<sup>8</sup> The French post-structural and American neo-pragmatic groups are the most adamant and clear in their rejection of the plausibility of meta-narratives. The neo-Reformed group represents a subset of the Christian response to postmodernism which accepts some postmodern criticisms of modern philosophy, yet seeks to maintain the plausibility of the Christian meta-narrative.

The grandfather of postmodernism is Friedrich Nietzsche. He is ultra-modern in his critique of modernity. Nietzsche predates Stiver's groups, but the French post-structural and American neo-pragmatic groups exemplify his influence. At the turn of the 20th century he predicted that modern man would be driven to nihilism. He said, "Ultimately, man finds in things nothing but what he himself has imported into them."<sup>9</sup> Meaning and truth are created by humans, and are, therefore, entirely relative. "There are no facts, only interpretations."<sup>10</sup> While few agreed with his extreme expression of nihilism, many agreed with his rejection of one standard, of static morality, and of objective truth. In Nietzsche's world, meta-narratives could not survive.

The French post-structuralist response to modernism builds on Nietzsche's assault on static morality and objective truth. If there is no truth, there is no meta-narrative. If there is no meta-narrative, then meaning becomes entirely relative and localized. This is why French post-structuralist Lyotard offered his definition of postmodernism as "incredulity toward meta-narratives." His focus was the rejection of scientific or social

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<sup>8</sup> I have simplified Stiver's category labels. I will comment on neo-Reformed postmodernists in a separate section dealing with Christian responses to postmodernism.

<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (Aristeus Books, 2012), 327, Kindle.

<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche, *Will*, 481, Kindle.



meta-narratives.<sup>11</sup> He observed that a loss of narrative resulted practically in loss of meaning. He said, “Lamenting the ‘loss of meaning’ in postmodernity boils down to mourning the fact that knowledge is no longer principally narrative.”<sup>12</sup> He also concluded that “Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative.”<sup>13</sup> Postmoderns have not only lost meta-narratives, but they don’t miss them.

Jacques Derrida, also a French post-structuralist, focused his criticism of modernity on linguistic structuralism. He continued to attack the feasibility of objective meaning on linguistic grounds. He famously wrote, “there is no meaning outside of the text.”<sup>14</sup> For Derrida, it is not possible to conceive reality through language. Every text must be deconstructed to be understood. As Vanhoozer summarizes, “He believes that the history of Western philosophy is an elaborate bluff.”<sup>15</sup> Derrida saw social implications of his theory, and was personally motivated by abuses of power (as are many leading postmodernists).<sup>16</sup> Meta-narratives, or comprehensive unifying narratives, cannot be true because they are limited to their text-world.

In such a climate, it is not hard to see why the French post-structuralist Michael Foucault rejected the concept of madness and reason *en toto*. In *Madness and*

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<sup>11</sup> Lyotard, xxiv.

<sup>12</sup> Lyotard, 26.

<sup>13</sup> Lyotard, 41.

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. Spivak (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 158.

<sup>15</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 21.

<sup>16</sup> Vanhoozer, 58.

*Civilization* he argues that madness is entirely subjective, having no medical cause. The assumption of the masses that there is a standard by which sanity can be measured is merely a social construct. Reason is simply the prevailing madness of those in authority. Schaeffer well summarizes Foucault's conclusion: "the ultimate in autonomous freedom is being crazy."<sup>17</sup>

Richard Rorty represents the American expression of many of the same ideas as the French post-structuralists. As a neo-pragmatic, Rorty attacked not merely scientific knowledge, but knowledge itself. He rejected the correspondence view of truth, and posited that foundational epistemology is simply a coping mechanism for humanity. At the outset of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* he states, "The aim of this book is to undermine the reader's confidence...in 'knowledge' as something about which there ought to be a 'theory' and which has 'foundations.'"<sup>18</sup> His bottom line is that language is relative, and never corresponds to anything called reality. Therefore, relativity and pluralism are presumed based on the limits of being and language. There is a physical reality out there, it is just impossible to perceive or describe it objectively.

Finally, a prime example of the postmodern rejection of any meta-narrative is found in the scientific postmodernist Thomas Kuhn and his work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn's premise is simple: scientific revolutions are not simply the result of objective research and scientific discovery. Rather, scientific revolutions are the result of changes in paradigm (i.e., meta-narrative). For Kuhn, paradigms are

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<sup>17</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *Trilogy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 254.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 7.

epistemic constructs. He identifies scientific experimentation with sensory experience, and then asks,

But is sensory experience fixed and neutral? Are theories simply man-made interpretations of given data? The epistemological viewpoint that has most often guided Western philosophy for three centuries dictates an immediate and unequivocal, Yes!... Yet it no longer functions effectively, and the attempts to make it do so through the introduction of neutral language of observations now seem to me hopeless.<sup>19</sup>

Kuhn is not anti-science. He asserts that scientific theories are not objective, and to assert that they are is a flaw of modern epistemology. Thus, the scientific world has seen meta-narrative displace meta-narrative.

So secular postmodernism is marked by a rejection of meta-narratives, and the foundational concepts of knowledge and language that make conceiving of a meta-narrative possible. This loss of meta-narratives is seen clearly in postmodern literature and film.

#### Expressions of Parataxis in Postmodern Literature and Television

The following examples demonstrate how the postmodernism of popular American culture today assumes there is no meta-narrative in life. This assumption emerged as postmodernism was evolving out of modernism. Franz Kafka's stories and novels express postmodern nihilism in its early days at the start of the twentieth century. In his introduction to Kafka's *The Complete Stories*, John Updike states, "Modernity has proceeded far enough, and spread wide enough, to make us

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 126.

doubt that anyone really has this secret [happiness].”<sup>20</sup> Kafka’s most famous story, *The Metamorphosis*, details the main character Gregor’s struggle upon waking to find that he has been transformed into a giant insect. The story is a rebuke of the modern man’s reality. Despite his condition, Gregor still works feverishly to try and get to his job, which he hates. Given his condition, his family wants to move, but won’t. He perceives “...what really kept them from moving into another flat was rather their own complete hopelessness and the belief that they had been singled out for a misfortune such as had never happened to any of their relations or acquaintances.”<sup>21</sup>

This is where modernity has left humanity- feeling out of place like a giant insect and hopeless due to misfortune; life is sorrow without story. What is best for Gregor’s family, in the end, is his death. What is important to see in Kafka is not merely the surreal setting of the narrative, but the meaninglessness of existence expressed in it.

Samuel Beckett’s novels and plays are a well known example of postmodernism in literature. His works challenge conceptions of reality through the confused perceptions of his characters and the lack of coherent narratives. In the first half of his novel, *Molloy*, we are exposed to the inner reasonings of a mad, wandering man who is trying to find his mother. We are even unsure of his name; he thinks it is Molloy. Life is brutal, and reduced to physiological needs: food, sex, and survival. The second half is told from the perspective of a private detective hired to find a man called “Molloy.” He leaves on his mission with his teenage son. He quarrels with his son, murders a man

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<sup>20</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 2, Kindle.

<sup>21</sup> Kafka, 124, Kindle.

in a fight, and is reduced to wandering as a drifter. What is the connection between the two characters? Is the first man even named “Molloy?” Is the second half the prequel to the first? Are they the same man? What is reality?

Beckett’s narrative strategy purposefully obscures any perception of “what really happened.” As one example, consider when Molloy is questioned about whether or not his mother’s name is Molloy as well. “Your mother, said the sergeant, is your mother’s- Let me think! I cried. At least I imagine that’s how it was.”<sup>22</sup> These questions cannot be answered, which is precisely Beckett’s design. Things happen (or might have happened), but there is no narrative. Molloy has plenty of sorrow, but not much of a story.

Virginia Woolfe’s literature is not as intensely anti-reason as Beckett’s. In a more subtle way she leads her reader to a critical appraisal of modernity. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, London high society wife Clarissa Dalloway plans a party. Woolfe writes jumping from the inner perspective of each character, freely traveling back and forth in time. The story climaxes when a veteran of the first world war commits suicide due to hallucinations. He was about to be involuntarily institutionalized, and chose death instead. This occurs just as Clarissa’s party was beginning and not far away. She hears about it, and admires the man for committing suicide rather than being unhappy. Woolfe presents the man’s doctors and the diagnosis that he is mad in a negative light. In line with postmodern conclusions, and perhaps anticipating Foucault, *Mrs. Dalloway*

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<sup>22</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (New York: Grove Press, 2009), 18, Kindle.

conveys the idea that rational science is the enemy of happiness. Indeed, Clarissa's friend Sally summarizes at the conclusion, "What does the brain matter, compared with the heart?"<sup>23</sup>

Shifting to current expressions of postmodernism in television writing, the show *LOST* contains an unprecedented philosophical perspective in mainstream American media culture. *LOST* relates the story of survivors of a plane crash on a mysterious island in the south Pacific. As it turns out, they were all killed in the crash. The narrative is driven by weaving the "back stories" of the main characters throughout the events that occurred on the island. The show later incorporated flash forwards and flash sideways.<sup>24</sup> Not only did *LOST* generate a cult following, it also spawned an entire sub-field of philosophical discussion, as evidenced by two published volumes of essays on the philosophical interpretation of *LOST*.<sup>25</sup> The show itself contains explicit references to philosophy and worldview issues. Main characters carry the names of famous philosophers like Locke, Hume, and Rousseau. Fate is referenced regularly. In "Exodus Part 3," the character John Locke explains the divergence of his opinion with that of the "hero" Jack Shephard by referring to Jack as a "man of science" and to himself as a "man of faith."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Virginia Woolfe, *Mrs. Dalloway* (n.p.: Dead Dodo Publishing, 2012), 227, Kindle.

<sup>24</sup> A flash sideways in the show *LOST* showed main characters meeting after death, which is another kind of flash forward.

<sup>25</sup> Both edited by Pearson, Moore, editor, *Lost Thought*, University Edition (N.p.: Pearson Moore, 2012), Kindle and *Lost Humanity: The Mythology and Themes of LOST* (N.p.: Pearson Moore, 2011), Kindle.

<sup>26</sup> *LOST*, season 1, episode 25, "Exodus Part 3," J. J. Abrams, Damon Lindelof, and Carlton Cruse, aired May 25, 2005, on ABC.

Philosophy scholars and fans of the show have argued about whether or not *LOST* is an expression of postmodern philosophy or a postmodern challenge to the nihilism of postmodernism. The structure of the show is as salient to this discussion as the explicit statements of the show's characters. As Pearson Moore states, "Lost is unencumbered with narrative structure."<sup>27</sup> The constant flashbacks, flash forwards, and flash sideways ensure that one narrative isn't sustained too long. We are constantly re-interpreting what is happening based on new information. This has the effect of undermining any certainty in interpreting the story. As Wright stated, "Like the island of *LOST*, both our ideas and we as human beings are moving targets in space and time."<sup>28</sup> In the final analysis, the show proves to be a snapshot of the postmodern struggle for meaning. Everyone is searching for it, but in reality they are just lost.

The genre of Zombie literature and television is another explicitly nihilistic expression of postmodern thought. The Zombie film genre is complex and variegated, yet the basic theme of survival is consistently present. Interestingly, in some later Zombie films the focus is on the survival of the Zombies rather than humanity.<sup>29</sup> With a highly developed sense of cultural irony, Zombie films key on themes of cooperation, social conformity, racism, and most explicitly, death. Life ends often and without warning. Thus, any meaning for life or meta-narrative is subordinated to the simple

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<sup>27</sup> Pearson Moore, "The Demands on the Green Pill: Metadrama in Lost," in *Lost Thought, University Edition* (N.p.: Pearson Moore, ed., 2012), 285, Kindle.

<sup>28</sup> Paul R. Wright, "Theological Syncretism in Lost" in *Lost Thought, University Edition* (N.p.: Pearson Moore, ed., 2012), 188, Kindle.

<sup>29</sup> Sara Sutler-Cohen, "Plans Are Pointless; Staying Alive Is as Good as It Gets: Zombie Sociology and the Politics of Survival," in *Zombies Are Us*, Christopher M. Moreman and Corey James Rushton, eds. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011), 186, Kindle.

issue of survival. For example, in the AMC series, *The Walking Dead*, conflict between human survivors of the Zombie apocalypse drives the story. As Sutler-Cohen observes, “At the end of the day, however—to be a survivor, relationships are key.”<sup>30</sup> In the post-apocalyptic world of Zombies, the postmodern de-emphasis on meaning results in heightened focus on community.

These examples all clearly express the postmodern message: there is no overarching, meta-narrative for existence. But they are not the only voices. As postmodernism emerged from modernism, Christians responded. Their analyses of postmodern thinking help to further clarify the problem of the loss of meta-narrative.

### **Christian Responses to the Loss of Meta-narrative in Postmodernism**

Christian responses to postmodernism highlight the perceived need within Christianity to address the issue of the loss of meta-narrative. Some Christians have sought to explain the reasons postmoderns reject any meta-narrative, while others have tried to equip the church to proclaim the gospel in light of postmodern shifts in thinking. What virtually all Christian responses agree on, with the exception of some “emergent church” authors, is that the loss of meta-narrative in postmodernism is inconsistent with a Christian worldview.

The postmodern problem with Christianity is an epistemological problem, specifically with foundationalist epistemology. According to Plantinga, “A classical foundationalist holds that there is a foundation for knowledge shared by all persons, or

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<sup>30</sup> Sutler-Cohen, “Staying Alive,” 192, Kindle.



perhaps all sane persons, or perhaps all rational persons...”<sup>31</sup> Modern foundationalist epistemology assumes the existence of pure, objective rationality. Foundationalism drove the modern period; modern thinkers assumed a strict distinction between subject and object, between the studier and what was being studied. But the idea of rational objectivity could not last. Postmodernists reject foundationalism entirely. For postmoderns all knowledge— spiritual, scientific, and otherwise—must be held with a loose hand.

Christians have responded to the postmodern rejection of broad foundationalism in two ways. Many have agreed with some postmodern criticism of foundationalism, and yet insist on maintaining the concept of objective rationality and truth. While they might not all welcome the label foundationalist, they are broadly foundationalist. Others, however, have embraced postmodernism to the point of rejecting the categories of objective truth and rationality.

Therefore, Christian responses to the loss of meta-narrative in postmodernism fall into two broad categories: those who are critical of postmodern non-foundational epistemology and those who embrace non-foundational postmodern epistemology.<sup>32</sup> I will refer to the first group as “foundationalist” and the second as “non-foundationalist,” with the understanding that not all in each group would agree with the labels.<sup>33</sup> The

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<sup>31</sup> Alvin Plantinga, “On Reformed Epistemology,” *Reformed Journal* 32, no. 1 (Jan. 1982): 13.

<sup>32</sup> These two groups somewhat align with Stiver’s two general groups of respondents to postmodernism: “pre-modernists” who reject postmodernism and “ultramodernists” who embrace at least some premises of postmodernism. Cf. Stivers, 93-94.

<sup>33</sup> I am using the term “foundationalist” in the most broad sense. Most Christian philosophers agree with the postmodern rejection of classical foundationalism, but they also have refused to throw the baby of objective truth and rationality out with the bathwater of classical foundationalism.

sample of Christian responses to postmodern thinking below highlights the postmodern problem of the loss of meta-narrative.

### Foundationalist Christian Analyses of Postmodernism

Foundationalist Christians who are critical of the loss of meta-narrative in postmodernism focus their criticism on three main postmodern positions: the loss of meaning, the subjective nature of non-foundationalist epistemology, and moral relativism. All three of these areas relate to the problem of the loss of meta-narrative.

First, foundationalist Christian responses to postmodernism address the loss of meaning. If Nietzsche was the grandfather of postmodernism, then Francis Schaeffer is the grandfather of the foundationalist Christian response. Although Schaeffer doesn't use the term postmodernism, he interacts with the concepts and key philosophers that later would be dubbed postmodern. Schaeffer makes the important observation that in a world where spiritual truth claims are invalid, meaninglessness is the only result. If man is merely an animal and there are no universal truths, then "God is dead, man is dead, and *meaning is dead*."<sup>34</sup> Schaeffer acknowledges that in general people find other substitutes for meaning, but in the end these are irrational. He anticipated what Lyotard later perceived, that as modernism evolved into postmodernism even scientific knowledge was inadequate for providing ultimate meaning.

David Wells has carried on Schaeffer's criticism of postmodernism. In *No Place for Truth*, he relates how the postmodern rejection of absolute truth has infiltrated

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<sup>34</sup> Schaeffer, 86. Emphasis mine.

theology and the church. In *God in the Wasteland*, Wells outlines what steps he believes the church needs to take in light of the postmodern situation. He helpfully explains how modernism failed, leading necessarily to postmodernism: “The assumption among the Enlightenment’s proponents that meaning and morality could be discovered simply within the bounds of natural reason and without reference to God has, even in our very secular age, become ever more empty.”<sup>35</sup>

For Wells, loss of meaning means the loss of meta-narrative and results in emptiness.

In *Above All Earthly Pow’rs*, Wells revisits some of these same issues from a post 9/11 perspective, also taking into account the contributions of globalism and high capitalism to postmodern thought. Given the loss of absolute truth and meta-narrative, consumerism has stepped into the gap. “Modern consumption is about buying *meaning* for ourselves.”<sup>36</sup> He traces how the mega-church phenomenon is in some ways a byproduct of postmodernism and how consumer driven religion has impacted the church. He also explains how the increase in access to other cultures, both via travel and immigration, has led to more access to alternative expressions of spiritual truth. The postmodern person is pro-spirituality, but at the same time anti-truth and authority. No one story is *the* story.

Carson exposes the inconsistency in the postmodern search for meaning. He states, “this is really the problem of postmodernism itself: as soon as it makes an

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<sup>35</sup> David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 46.

<sup>36</sup> David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow’rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 77. Emphasis his.

absolute claim that all truth claims are relative, it has forged its own meta-narrative.”<sup>37</sup>

He states that the Bible provides the meta-narrative that postmoderns reject, yet still desperately want.<sup>38</sup> The incoherence of the postmodern circular reasoning regarding meta-narrative shows the problem of the loss of meta-narrative. Note here Carson’s argument that the postmodern claim that meta-narratives are invalid simply doesn’t work.

Christian philosopher and theologian Kevin Vanhoozer recognized that the loss of meta-narrative and ultimate meaning is a result of the postmodern hermeneutics expressed by authors such as Derrida, Rorty, and Habermas. Vanhoozer provided a thorough analysis of and response to postmodern hermeneutics in *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* He interacts in detail with the deconstructionism of Derrida, the epistemology of Rorty, and the dialogue focus of Habermas. Rather than merely re-state Christian hermeneutics in modern language, VanHoozer updates his language to address the issues of postmodern interpretation. He deals with the linguistic as well as theological implications of postmodern philosophies. He observes, “Postmodern language, like postmodern life, becomes tragic, signifying nothing.”<sup>39</sup> Again, the loss of meta-narrative results in a major problem for postmoderns: absolute meaninglessness.

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<sup>37</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 147, Kindle.

<sup>38</sup> Carson, *Gagging*, 192, Kindle.

<sup>39</sup> Vanhoozer, 203.

The second main area foundationalist Christian authors target in their responses to postmodernism is the subjective nature of non-foundationalist epistemology. Schaeffer deals with the problem of epistemology in *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*. He traces how in modern thinking the primacy of human reason necessarily resulted in the conclusion that certainty regarding spiritual truth was impossible. On one side of the fence is faith, which according to modern man cannot be proven, and therefore is entirely relative. On the other side is natural truth, which in modernism can be studied and proven via the scientific method. He states, “The uniformity of natural causes in a closed system has become the dominant philosophy among scientists.”<sup>40</sup> God becomes marginalized and eventually forgotten in modern thought. Schaeffer forecasted the coming postmodern rejection of scientific truth along with spiritual truth. Spiritually defined meta-narratives cannot exist in a world without spiritual truth.

He later responds to the postmodern epistemological objection to the assumption that humans can know anything with certainty. He applies common sense and experience, and argues that while humans do not communicate perfectly, we do communicate. “To say that God communicates *truly* does not mean that God communicates *exhaustively*. Even in our human relationships we never have exhaustive communication, though what we do have may be true.”<sup>41</sup> Schaeffer defends the plausibility of the Christian meta-narrative by defending the plausibility of true communication from God.

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<sup>40</sup> Schaeffer, 230.

<sup>41</sup> Schaeffer, 100. Emphasis his.

Carson picks up on this crucial counter point to postmodern epistemology. His analysis of postmodernism in *The Gagging of God* deals with pluralism and relativism.<sup>42</sup> He probes the postmodern hermeneutics which result in pluralism, as well as the issue of the plausibility of revelation by God in the Bible. He acknowledges the validity of the postmodern conclusion that knowledge is subjective in the sense that our culture and background impact our understanding. But he also affirms “over against postmodernism... there is one particular perspective that is objectively true.”<sup>43</sup>

C. S. Lewis also makes this same defense of foundational epistemology in *The Abolition of Man*, “If nothing is self-evident, nothing can be proved.”<sup>44</sup> He argues that to remove foundations (self-evident truths), then there is no basis on which to evaluate truth, value, morality, or meaning. He believed such an epistemological move would be catastrophic, hence his title.

David Wells shows how if culturally conditioned personal interpretations are the only source of truth or knowledge, then there is no “external Reality which corrects and nullifies false perceptions.”<sup>45</sup> He uses a dramatic illustration to describe the threat this line of thinking is to Christianity as it results in the rejection of the existence of special revelation, “...without belief in biblical revelation we are today staring down the barrel

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<sup>42</sup> Many of the same concepts are summarized and applied to the “Emerging Church” in *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005).

<sup>43</sup> Carson, *Gagging*, 186, Kindle.

<sup>44</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: HarperCollins: 1944), loc. 345, Kindle.

<sup>45</sup> Wells, *Pow'rs*, 85.

of a dark nihilism.”<sup>46</sup> He thus makes a familiar conclusion: without the possibility of meta-narrative, hopelessness is the necessary result.

John Frame has provided a thoroughly nuanced foundationalist response to postmodern epistemology. He agrees with the postmodern idea that much of our rationality is indeed subjective, but he insists that subjective and objective rationality are not mutually exclusive. For Frame, the reality of subjective rationality does not preclude the existence and importance of objective rationality. He states, “rationality in the individual sense depends on rationality in the universal sense.”<sup>47</sup>

He explicitly addresses the problem the existence of God poses for an entirely subjective rationality.<sup>48</sup> In responding to the lack of reference to God in John Pollock’s *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge*, Frame states, “Is it perhaps that, having eliminated any role for God in this epistemology, he [Pollock] is thus unable to give any cogent account of ‘objective truth’?”<sup>49</sup> For Frame, God’s existence and objective truth and rationality are essentially related.

As they critically responded to the loss of meta-narrative in postmodernism, foundationalist Christians focus on a third major issue: moral relativism. Moral relativism is the only possible stance in a world without meaning and objective

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<sup>46</sup> Wells, *Pow’rs*, 88.

<sup>47</sup> John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing: 1987), 396.

<sup>48</sup> Theories of epistemology that posit an entirely subjective rationality are sometimes called “coherence theories” because the final determiner for justified beliefs is internal coherence. See John Frame, “Christianity and Contemporary Epistemology,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 52, no. 1 (March 1990): 138.

<sup>49</sup> Frame, “Christianity and Contemporary Epistemology,” 136.

rationality and knowledge. One of Schaeffer's most important contributions to the discussion is the concept of the "line of despair" as it relates to relativism and absolute truth. The line of despair is the point in time before which someone considers the idea of absolutes or universals possible. Below the line of despair, there is no possibility for absolutes.<sup>50</sup> He posits that the German philosopher Hegel opened a Pandora's box of relativism by advocating synthesis as opposed to antithesis (cause and effect) in philosophy. Schaeffer then argues that such a worldview systematically spread from philosophy to art, music, general culture, and finally theology.<sup>51</sup> The loss of meta-narrative, in Schaeffer's analysis, pushes people below the line of despair.

This resultant relativism is tolerant of anything except for truth claims. Many Christian analyses draw out the illogical nature of such a worldview. Carson observes that postmodern philosophical pluralism "is so opinionated that it tends to drive out empirical pluralism; its plea for tolerance is so imperial that it is remarkably intolerant."<sup>52</sup> He concludes that Heidegger's attack on foundationalism, by asserting the universality of prejudices, opens the door to relativism.<sup>53</sup> He states, "But if one cannot talk about the objective truth of the matter, then the interpretations are merely personal or at best culturally conditioned options."<sup>54</sup> Lewis argues for "the doctrine of objective

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<sup>50</sup> Schaeffer, *Trilogy*, 8-9.

<sup>51</sup> David Wells takes issue with the idea that formal philosophy can trickle down to general culture, but Schaeffer's analysis has stood the test of time. Cf. Wells, *Pow'rs*, 64-65.

<sup>52</sup> Carson, *Gagging*, 133, Kindle.

<sup>53</sup> Carson, *Gagging*, 68, Kindle.

<sup>54</sup> Carson, *Gagging*, 20, Kindle.



value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are.”<sup>55</sup> These criticisms highlight that on a practical level, postmodern relativism simply does not work.

Foundationalist Christians responses to postmodern views on meaning, subjective epistemology and relativism all directly or indirectly address the problem of the loss of meta-narrative. These respondents recognize that as it stands postmodernism is a climate unsuitable for the Christian claim to provide the meta-narrative for life. However, some Christians have responded to postmodernism with acceptance rather than criticism.

#### Non-foundationalist Christian analyses of postmodernism

Many non-foundationalist Christian respondents to postmodernism agree with the postmodern skepticism regarding anything that approaches a spiritual truth claim, and they emphasize the limits of our ability to know infinite truths. Regarding the problem of the loss of meta-narrative in postmodernism, this epistemological skepticism results in two responses. First, moderate non-foundationalist Christians argue that postmodernism has irrevocably changed the landscape of Western culture, and Christianity must adapt or die. The ideas of objective truth and the inspiration of Scripture are insufficient and outdated. The church needs new ways to communicate the gospel to postmodern people. Second, extreme non-foundationalist Christians go further and embrace an openness to alternative meta-narratives. The lack of distinctive

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<sup>55</sup> Lewis, *Abolition*, loc. 161, Kindle.

Christian meta-narrative for this second group makes it difficult to categorize them as Christian. Given epistemological skepticism, they suggest that the church's message must change as well. The church doesn't just need a new way to communicate the gospel, she needs an updated gospel. Uniquely, then, these authors have embraced the heart of postmodernism while trying to remain somewhat distinct as Christian. Crucially, the first group recognizes the postmodern loss of meta-narrative as a problem, while the second does not.

Moderate non-foundationalist Christians seek to affirm the idea of a Christian meta-narrative, but without affirming the foundationalist ideas of objective rationality. From a philosophical perspective, theologians Stanley Grenz and John Franke agree with the postmodern criticism of epistemological foundationalism. They write, "... there is a certain 'objectivity' to the world. But this objectivity is not that of a static reality existing outside of, and coterminally with, our socially and linguistically constructed reality; it is not the objectivity of what some might call 'the world as it is.'"<sup>56</sup>

Since objective reality is outside of our constructed reality, the Bible cannot be the source for objective truth. Instead, Grenz views the Bible as constitutional. Recall that broadly speaking foundationalism affirms the idea of objective rationality and truth. In the foundationalist view, the Bible is static, "the inerrant deposit of revelation."<sup>57</sup> For

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<sup>56</sup> Stanley Grenz and John Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 53.

<sup>57</sup> Stanley Grenz, "An Agenda for Evangelical Theology in the Postmodern Context," *Didaskalia* 9, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 9.

many, this means that the Bible contains propositional truths. Instead, Grenz says, “The Bible provides the categories by means of which we as the Christian community understand ourselves, our world, and our calling in the world.”<sup>58</sup> This statement is offered in contrast to those who would view the Bible primarily as a source for making truth claims. This is how Grenz seeks to maintain the idea of a Christian meta-narrative. He argues that the constitutional function of the Bible is how people adopt the biblical meta-narrative. He states, “When confronted by the Spirit-energized gospel message, we reinterpret our own narratives according to the categories of that story and link our own stories with the story of God through connection with the story of the people of God.”<sup>59</sup>

Even though Grenz agrees that the foundationalist idea of objective rationality is inaccurate, he explicitly refuses to embrace the postmodern rejection of meta-narrative. He states, “The abandonment of the belief in universal truth entails the loss of any final criterion by which to evaluate the various interpretations of reality that compete in the contemporary intellectual realm.”<sup>60</sup> Thus he still affirms the idea of universal truth, even if in his post foundationalist model amounts to a “‘non-answer’ to modernism.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Grenz, “Agenda,” 10.

<sup>59</sup> Grenz, “Agenda,” 11. By way of contrast, Carson argues that the affective element of the Bible is grounded in the propositional truths found therein. He says, “in the postmodern environment, such approaches *must* be anchored in objective, propositional, confessional truth...” Cf. Carson, *Gagging*, 507.

<sup>60</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 163.

<sup>61</sup> Robert C. Kurka, “Before ‘Foundationalism’: a More Biblical Alternative to the Grenze/Franke Proposal for Doing Theology,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50, no. 1 (March 2007), 162.

Non-foundationalist Charles Taylor also recognizes the problem of the loss of meta-narrative in postmodernism. He observes that due to the atheistic assumptions of postmodernism, people end up with “a new understanding of being, according to which, all intrinsic purposes having been expelled, final causation drops out, and efficient causation alone remains.”<sup>62</sup> His central argument is that, for postmoderns, atheism (and the rejection of any meta-narrative) is the default setting. He says, “conditions have arisen in the modern world in which it is no longer possible, honestly, rationally, without confusions, or fudging, or mental reservation, to believe in God.”<sup>63</sup>

In the same vein, Smith states regarding postmodernism, “It’s not just that belief in supernatural entities becomes implausible; it’s that pursuing a way of life that values something beyond human flourishing becomes unimaginable.”<sup>64</sup> Note the consistent identification of the postmodern dilemma of loss meta-narrative and meaning.

Extreme non-foundationalist Christians acknowledge the postmodern loss of meta-narrative, but they do not see it as a problem. If the postmodern skepticism of any truth claim is on target, then naturally any Christian claim to offer *the* meta-narrative is suspect. Thus some “emergent church” writers have incorporated higher tolerance toward and embracing of other religions.<sup>65</sup> Brian McLaren asks, “To accept and love

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<sup>62</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press: 2007), 98.

<sup>63</sup> Taylor, 560.

<sup>64</sup> James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014), loc. 1840, Kindle.

<sup>65</sup> As many authors note, there is no easy criteria to determine exactly who is “emergent.” My comments here are limited to the most well known and outspoken authors in this general Christian subculture.

God, must I betray my neighbor of another religion?”<sup>66</sup> He does not argue that there is no distinction between Christianity and other religions, but rather that Christianity is hindered by sin and therefore needs other religions to round out its message. He states, “Yes, something good still shines from the heart of our religions—a saving drive toward peace, goodness, self-control, integrity, charity, beauty, duty.”<sup>67</sup> For him, this “saving drive” is not exclusive to Christianity.

The relativism that results from the postmodern assumption of the implausibility of objective truth has produced a new wave of universalists. This postmodern version of religious pluralism is markedly different from nineteenth century universalism. Carson observes that in the nineteenth century universalists believed that no matter what someone believed in life, after death they would eventually come to faith in Christ. He states they “could thus hold to the superiority of Christianity while espousing universalism.”<sup>68</sup> Postmodern religious pluralists, however, “are inclined to treat all religions of equivalent worth even during this life.”<sup>69</sup> Rob Bell articulates this well, “Jesus is bigger than any one religion.”<sup>70</sup> Thus people may embrace any meta-narrative, or none, because the Christian story is not *the* story.

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<sup>66</sup> Brian D. McLaren, *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 15.

<sup>67</sup> McLaren, *Why Did Jesus*, 20.

<sup>68</sup> Carson, *Gagging*, 142, Kindle.

<sup>69</sup> Carson, *Gagging*, 142, Kindle.

<sup>70</sup> Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (New York, HarperOne: 2011), 150.

McLaren and others still recognize the postmodern embracing of wholesale relativism is logically incoherent. In *The Church on the Other Side* he writes that “Postmodernism is the latest in a long series of absurdities.”<sup>71</sup> For McLaren, postmodernism may be absurd, but the modernist truth claims of any meta-narrative are suspicious.

One example of the extreme non-foundationalist appropriation of postmodern skepticism of truth claims is in the skepticism of labeling sin, sin. If we can’t be certain of anything, what right do we have to label certain behaviors as sin? Steve Chalke states that Jesus believed in “original goodness,” and he rejects “any idea that we are, somehow, beyond the pale.”<sup>72</sup> In such a climate, Jesus’ death—the central event and focus of Christianity—is not a means of payment for sin. Carson notes how this has an incredible impact on how one interprets the atonement. He states, “...for Chalke, the cross is merely ‘a symbol of love.’”<sup>73</sup>

These Christian responses to postmodernism, both foundationalist and non-foundationalist, demonstrate that the idea of a meta-narrative is incompatible with a postmodern worldview. This loss of meta-narrative leads directly to parataxis, now prevalent in postmodern American culture.

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<sup>71</sup> Brian D. McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 165.

<sup>72</sup> Steve Chalke, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 67.

<sup>73</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 186.

## Understanding Parataxis

The postmodern loss of meta-narrative, whether it be personal or social, results in a *paratactic* view of life. The loss of meta-narrative is not just a generic problem, nor is it just a philosophical problem. It impacts how people interpret the daily happenings of their lives. In one sense, parataxis is where the rubber of postmodernism meets the road of belief and action. I will offer a definition of parataxis, and then review its emergence in modernism and expression in postmodernism.

### Defining Parataxis

Parataxis is the belief that there is no purpose to the happenings of life. In literature, parataxis is placing “things ‘along-side-of’ one another without linking them in chronological, logical, or organic order.”<sup>74</sup> The term itself is of Greek origin, and is made up of the prefix *para* which means “along side” and the root *tag* which means “to place or put.” The idea of parataxis can be contrasted with syntax—the placing of the things together. If the hallmark of postmodernism is the rejection of meta-narratives, then parataxis is the consequential worldview that events in life have no relation to each other.

Parataxis is the direct result of the loss of meta-narrative in postmodernism. If the postmodern conclusion that there is no unifying narrative for history and the universe is true, then the happenings of life have no significance beyond our experience of them.

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<sup>74</sup> Richard Lischer, "Limits of Story," *Interpretation* 38, no. 1 (January 1984), 31.

Rather, the happenings of our lives are just that, happenings. As *LOST*'s Kate said, "Some things just happen. No rhyme, no reason."<sup>75</sup>

### Parataxis in Modernism

Parataxis was latent in modernism. On one hand, modern thinking still assumed a meta-narrative. Rather than being based on the sovereignty of God, it was instead based on the sovereignty of reason. Objectivism reigned: "adequate foundations plus appropriate method ensure a corpus of objective knowledge."<sup>76</sup> There was a progression of this thought within modernism itself. As Stiver states, "At first, philosophy, then science, became the new religion."<sup>77</sup>

On the other hand, certain developments within modernism hinted at the existence and spread of parataxis. The new economic realities of industrialized life produced a highly compartmentalized modern existence. Rather than "parataxis," modern sociologists used the term "differentiation" to describe how people made distinctions between different aspects of their lives.<sup>78</sup> Differentiation spread from factory assembly lines where tasks were isolated from life in general. "Not only is 'work' split off from 'home' but also from 'leisure,' 'religion' and so on."<sup>79</sup> This fragmented view of life

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<sup>75</sup> *LOST*, season 1, episode 7, "The Moth," J. J. Abrams, Damon Lindelof, and Carlton Cuse, aired November 3, 2004, on ABC.

<sup>76</sup> Carson, *Gagging*, 61, Kindle.

<sup>77</sup> Stiver, "Much Ado," 89.

<sup>78</sup> Lyon, 29.

<sup>79</sup> Lyon, 29.



precluded any overarching coherence. Practically, there was no meta-narrative uniting work, home, leisure, religion, etc. These modern worlds simply did not collide. Thus parataxis emerged in modernism as a sign of what was to come. As postmodern culture further rejected any claim of meta-narrative, parataxis became the rule rather than the exception.

### Parataxis in Postmodernism

In the modern era, the faith-driven universal of God was replaced by the reason-driven universal of progress as the meta-narrative, and it was precisely with this that postmodernism took issue. Postmodernism's rejection of any over-arching, comprehensive narrative for life and history was the inevitable outcome of the modern rejection of the respectability of faith. God was dead. Progress failed. The world wars of the twentieth century proved that science and humanity were as much our enemies as our saviors. There was no stopping the skepticism. In postmodernism, "The meta-narrative of progress can no longer be assumed."<sup>80</sup> Rather than replace progress with another doomed-to-fail unifying principle, postmoderns simply assume there is none.

Life, for the postmodern person, is meaningless in the long run. "If there is no universal storyteller, then the universe can have no story line."<sup>81</sup> As Lischer says, "If

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<sup>80</sup> Lyon, 54.

<sup>81</sup> Jenson, 33.

they ever had a story, it reached its emotional or economic coda long before its bios ran out. It is over.”<sup>82</sup> Life is sorrow without story.

No grand story or meta-narrative does not necessarily mean no stories at all. In light of the paratactic rejection of meaning in the universal story, people seek to make sense of their lives within reference to themselves. Wells says, “In postmodernity, the autonomous being refuses to be fettered by any objective reality outside of itself.”<sup>83</sup> This doesn’t mean that people just wander aimlessly; they seek relevance in their mini-universe. Lyotard acknowledged that people make connections, and have mini-narratives. “A *self* does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before.”<sup>84</sup>

Postmoderns consciously struggle with this issue. Lischer observes that author Samuel Beckett “has testified—witnessed—to the ‘mess’ all around us in which people are trapped in lives of hopelessness.”<sup>85</sup> One of the most prominent themes in *LOST* was the back and forth between fate and mere coincidence. John Locke says to Jack Shephard in “Exodus Part 3,” “Do you really think all this is an accident?... Do you think we crashed on this place by coincidence?... We were brought here for a purpose, for a reason, all of us. Each one of us was brought here for a reason.”<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Lischer, 31.

<sup>83</sup> Wells, *Pow’rs*, 68.

<sup>84</sup> Lyotard, 15. Emphasis his.

<sup>85</sup> Lischer, 31.

<sup>86</sup> *LOST*, season 1, episode 25, “Exodus Part 3,” J. J. Abrams, Damon Lindelof, and Carlton Cruse, aired May 25, 2005, on ABC.

Paradoxically, postmoderns embrace the search for mini-narratives and significance. Taylor develops this idea, and Smith aptly summarizes: “Taylor seems to recognize that we are ‘narrative animals’: we define who we are, and what we ought to do, on the basis of what story we see ourselves in.”<sup>87</sup>

So the postmodern sits in a meaningless mess. While any meta-narrative seems incredulous, people look to find some aspects of meaning in community and mini-narratives. In the end, however, the postmodern is lost. In many ways, the postmodern is caught in a Zombie filled post-apocalyptic nightmare; meaning is only found in survival.

### **Conclusion**

Postmodern culture is thus plagued with the problem of parataxis, the direct result of the rejection of meta-narrative. Key articulations of postmodernism show the common theme of the rejection of meta-narrative, and Christian analyses of postmodernism reveal that such a rejection is inconsistent with a Christian worldview. As Western culture moved from modernism to postmodernism parataxis became normative; stuff just happens.

Enter canonical apocalyptic literature. In the midst of the postmodern quagmire of suffering sorrows with no story, canonical apocalyptic literature uniquely provides the story. Canonical apocalyptic literature was born in circumstances of hopelessness

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<sup>87</sup> Smith, *Secular*, loc. 507, Kindle.

similar to the postmodern paratactic way of life. In a story-less society, canonical apocalyptic literature offers the hope of not just *a* story, but *the* story.

In chapter two I will review the key biblical and theological themes related to the apocalyptic literature of the Bible. The preaching of canonical apocalyptic literature to address the issue of parataxis in postmodernism must be based on a theology of preaching apocalyptic texts. Crucially, canonical apocalyptic texts are inspired by God and profitable for the equipping of Christians. I will review the nature of apocalyptic works in general and key differences in interpretive approaches, especially noting the revised dispensational hermeneutic which downplays the visionary element. I will review various approaches to non-canonical apocalyptic literature, noting key differences in their relevance to interpreting canonical apocalyptic texts. Finally, I will review the theological basis of the sovereignty of God which is presupposed in prophetic literature and central to the idea of future-telling in prophetic visions.

Apocalyptic is the mother of Christian Theology.

—Ernst Käsemann, *New Testament Quotations for Today*

## CHAPTER TWO

### BIBLICAL & THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

#### **Introduction**

My thesis is canonical apocalyptic literature restores the lost meta-narrative in postmodern culture by providing a visionary representation of future victory for the people of God anchored in the narrated experience of the vision recipient. The preaching of apocalyptic portions of the Bible addresses the postmodern problem of parataxis. This thesis is based on a biblical/theological framework for interpreting and preaching canonical apocalyptic literature. To establish this biblical/theological foundation, I will first offer a definition of canonical apocalyptic literature and identify which parts of the Bible are apocalyptic literature. Second, I will develop a theology for preaching canonical apocalyptic texts. Third, I will review interpretive issues in dealing with apocalyptic literature, especially the symbolic and visionary elements. Fourth, I will review the theological basis of the sovereignty of God which is presupposed in prophetic literature and central to the idea of future telling in prophetic visions.

## Defining Apocalyptic Literature

In order to explore how canonical apocalyptic literature addresses the problem of parataxis in postmodernism, I must first define apocalyptic literature. Scholars have disagreed about the legitimacy of the existence of a genre of canonical apocalyptic literature. I will argue that such a genre exists, and that it is a sub-genre of prophecy. Then I will offer a definition of apocalyptic literature and identify the portions of the Bible which fit that definition and are thus apocalyptic.

There are at least two pitfalls in attempting to define apocalyptic literature as noted by Collins: defining the genre too broadly or too narrowly.<sup>1</sup> If we define the genre too narrowly, too many texts which are certainly apocalyptic will be left out on a technicality. On the other hand, if the definition is too broad, then the distinction of apocalypse and prophecy in general will be lost. An example of too broad a definition is to define apocalypse as prophecy having to do with the end times. Many prophetic passages contain material related to the end times, yet they do not have most elements found in apocalyptic works.<sup>2</sup> This tension is resolved by understanding apocalyptic literature as a sub-genre of prophecy.

### Apocalypse as a Sub-genre of Prophecy

Does a genre of canonical apocalyptic literature exist? Today scholars acknowledge the genre of apocalyptic literature has existed since the sixth century BC,

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<sup>1</sup> John J. Collins, "Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre," *Semeia* 14 (1979): 5.

<sup>2</sup> Collins, "Morphology," 10.

but it was not identified as such until the nineteenth century. As Arthurs summarizes, “As a term denoting a genre, apocalyptic first appeared in biblical criticism at the beginning of the nineteenth century to refer to visionary eschatological literature, but the genre itself existed from the Babylonian exile (586 B.C.) to the destruction of Jerusalem (A.D. 135).”<sup>3</sup>

A literary genre “consists of a group of texts which exhibit a coherent and recurring pattern of features constituted by the interrelated elements of form, content and function.” The existence of a genre requires the identification a group of texts that share certain features.<sup>4</sup> Sparks lists eight criteria for identifying a genre: content and theme, language, context, function, form and structure, material attributes (physical composition), modes of composition and reception, and tradition.<sup>5</sup>

In the nineteenth century scholars began to recognize that a sub-genre existed with prophetic works. Some of the recurring features that led scholars to identify a new genre were visions that use highly symbolic language, angelic guides, revelations of heaven, dualism, and visions of eschatological salvation. Collins suggests that the three main characteristics of apocalyptic texts are a narrative framework, mediated revelation, and eschatological content.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2007), 179-80.

<sup>4</sup> David Aune, “The Apocalypse of John and the Problem of Genre,” *Semeia* 36 (1986): 66.

<sup>5</sup> Kenton Sparks, *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 12-20.

<sup>6</sup> John Collins, *Daniel with an Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1984), 4.

Many texts share these features, and they come from varying time periods and cultures. Sparks lists Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Persian, and Greek apocalyptic works that have patterns similar to potentially apocalyptic OT works.<sup>7</sup> Evans lists non-canonical works that predate the NT book of Revelation and are important for interpreting Revelation. These include primarily Jewish apocalypses: 1 Enoch, part of the Sybilic Oracles, the Treatise of Shem, the Apocryphon of Ezekiel, the Apocalypse of Zephaniah, and 4 Ezra.<sup>8</sup>

### *Recognition of a Genre*

In the nineteenth century a new area of Biblical studies emerged entitled “apocalypics.” Scholars recognized different categories of texts within this newly discovered genre: Old Testament canonical apocalypses, Old Testament apocryphal apocalypses, the New Testament Apocalypse, and Jewish-Christian apocryphal apocalypses.<sup>9</sup> Milton Terry’s initial definition, although broad, shows the progression of the study of this sub-genre as a special kind of revelation: “The Biblical apocalypses, therefore, are those sacred books and portions of books which contain revelations or disclosures of God’s view of things.”<sup>10</sup>

Scholars from various interpretive schools of thought began to include sections on apocalyptic literature in their hermeneutic textbooks. Sometimes authors included these

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<sup>7</sup> Sparks, 240-251. Some of these are proto-apocalyptic in that they only display a few of features that will characterize later apocalyptic texts.

<sup>8</sup> Craig Evans, *Ancient Texts for New Testament Studies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 29-34.

<sup>9</sup> John Peter Lange, *The Revelation St. John*, trans. by Philip Schaff (New York: Scribner & Sons, 1874), 8.

<sup>10</sup> Milton Terry, *Biblical Apocalypics* (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1898), 12.



sections as independent chapters, sometimes they included them as a subset of a chapter on prophecy. Writing in the 1940s, Ramm states, “The *apocalypse* is one of the modes of prophetic communication.”<sup>11</sup> Johnson includes a separate section for apocalyptic literature in his work *Expository Hermeneutics*, and also shows the relationship between apocalyptic literature and prophecy: “What prophetic and apocalyptic literature have in common is that both are species of prophetic revelation...”<sup>12</sup>

Some scholars, however, contest the idea of a genre of canonical apocalyptic literature and its distinction from or within prophecy. Thomas is critical of NT genre studies in general. He states that there is no consensus as to what constitutes a genre, and therefore “discussions attempting to classify portions of the NT, including Revelation, are a best vague.”<sup>13</sup> Hill reminds us that “Despite the diagnostic analysis of biblical and extra-biblical documents according to a shared ‘cluster of traits,’ there is no consensus on what constitutes the genre of apocalyptic literature as distinct from biblical prophecy.”<sup>14</sup>

Others practically ignore the existence of apocalyptic literature as a genre. Zuck does not include a chapter or subsection on apocalyptic literature in his hermeneutic textbook *Basic Bible Interpretation*, published in 1991. He treats apocalyptic literature

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<sup>11</sup> Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1970), 267, emphasis his.

<sup>12</sup> Elliott Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 165.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Thomas, “Literary Genre and Hermeneutics of the Apocalypse,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 80.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew E. Hill, *Daniel*, vol. 8, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Daniel-Malachi* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 31.

as prophecy: “A special form of prophetic literature is apocalyptic material, which focuses specifically on the end times, while presenting the material in symbolic form.”<sup>15</sup>

While there is no consensus, scholars agree that apocalyptic literature is integrally related to prophecy, and manifests some very specific distinct features. In the late nineteenth century Terry wrote, “An apocalypse is in its nature associated with prophecy... But we must distinguish between apocalypse and prophecy.”<sup>16</sup>

#### *Apocalyptic Literature as a Sub-genre of Prophecy*

The existence of so many texts that share common features justifies the conclusion that apocalyptic literature is indeed a genre of literature found in both the OT and NT. Furthermore, it is a subset of the more broad genre of prophecy.

According to Aune, “All cultures of the ancient Mediterranean world and the Near East had a revelatory worldview.”<sup>17</sup> Prophets are the human mediums for messages from the gods. The genre of prophecy includes any work where the author presents himself as a spokesman for God. This includes both categories of forth-telling and fore-telling.<sup>18</sup>

Not all prophecy is apocalyptic, but all apocalyptic works can be classified as prophecy. How one defines the genres of prophecy and apocalypse necessarily dictates what works will be considered apocalyptic.

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<sup>15</sup> Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1991), 135.

<sup>16</sup> Terry, *Apocalypics*, 11-12.

<sup>17</sup> David Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987) 231.

<sup>18</sup> Osborne, 206. Also see Robert Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011) 137.

The apocalyptic texts in the OT and NT all occur as part of a greater prophetic work. In some cases, like Revelation, the apocalyptic parts of the book are dominant. Apocalyptic visions serve to advance the message of the prophetic works in which they occur. It is crucial to recognize apocalyptic literature as a subset of prophecy in order to grasp each text's contribution to the larger prophetic whole.<sup>19</sup>

### A Working Definition of Apocalypse

A study group of the Society of Biblical Literature developed a working definition of the genre of apocalypse between 1979 and 1986. It reads,

"Apocalypse" is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world, intended to interpret present, earthly circumstances in light of the super-natural world and of the future, and to influence both the understanding and the behavior of the audience by means of divine authority.<sup>20</sup>

The SBL definition encompasses four categories of analysis of a potentially apocalyptic text: form, method, content, and purpose of the revelation. First, apocalyptic texts contain revelations in the form of a visionary experience within a narrative framework. Second, that revelation is mediated by an "otherworldly being." Third, the content of the revelation describes a "transcendent reality" of ultimate salvation and of heaven, both hidden to the audience. Fourth, the apocalypse is intended to reinterpret circumstances in light of the transcendent reality and to motivate change in belief and action in the audience by virtue of the divine origin of the revelation.

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<sup>19</sup> Andreas J. Kostenberger, and Richard D. Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 518; D. Brent Sandy, *Plowshares & Pruning Hooks* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 107.

<sup>20</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins, "Introduction: Early Christian Apocalypticism," *Semeia* 36 (1986): 7.

Other interpreters offer definitions of apocalyptic literature that reflect the same major categories. Kostenberger and Patterson define apocalypse by three elements related to the form and content of the revelation: 1) the work comprises a visionary or revelatory means of communication, 2) the work is saturated with symbolic, figurative, and metaphorical language, and 3) the work contains a dualism between earthly and heavenly realities.<sup>21</sup> The main differences between the SBL definition and that of Kostenberger and Patterson is that Kostenberger and Patterson have omitted the presence of a narrative framework and an “otherworldly being” as the mediator of the revelation and they do not mention the purpose of the work. They further describe the revelation as being saturated with symbolic and figurative language.

Retaining the otherworldly mediator and narrative framework as defining characteristics is helpful because much prophecy deals with eschatology yet is not apocalyptic. Osborne preserves the presence of the otherworldly mediator and the narrative framework in his definition.<sup>22</sup> Zuck’s definition includes an angelic messenger, but not the narrative framework.<sup>23</sup> I am inclined to use the more thorough SBL definition for the sake of clearly distinguishing which parts of prophesy are apocalyptic, while adding the descriptive element from Kostenberger and Patterson.

Seven apocalyptic features identify apocalyptic texts (incorporating the four categories and features of apocalyptic from the SBL definition, with the added

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<sup>21</sup> Kostenberger and Patterson, 520-21.

<sup>22</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 222.

<sup>23</sup> Zuck, 243.

description of the form of the revelation as symbolic and figurative from Kostenberger and Patterson).

Table 1. Features of Apocalyptic Literature	
Apocalyptic Features	Apocalyptic Features
Disclosure of eschatological reality	Discloses transcendent reality of eschatological salvation
Disclosure of heaven	Discloses transcendent reality of heaven
Revelation highly figurative and symbolic	Visionary revelation highly figurative and symbolic
Revelation given in narrative framework	Revelation given in narrative framework
Mediated by an "otherworldly" being	Mediated by an "otherworldly" being
To reinterpret circumstances in light of transcendent reality	To reinterpret circumstances in light of transcendent reality
To effect change in belief and action by virtue of divine authority	To effect change in belief and action by virtue of divine authority

Some of the apocalyptic features above are more salient than others, and should be weighted more heavily. A. Collins argues that the disclosure of a transcendent reality of eschatological salvation is the most salient. She says, "It seems that eschatological content is the primary distinguishing mark of apocalypses over against other revelatory texts which are very similar in form, such as ritual prescriptions for creating revelatory experience and texts dealing with revelatory magic."<sup>24</sup> Therefore, while every apocalyptic text need not contain all seven features, the content of the revelation must deal with eschatological salvation. Assuming a given potentially apocalyptic text reveals eschatological salvation and heaven, it is possible to propose a scale of

<sup>24</sup> A. Y. Collins, "Introduction," 5.

apocalyptic literature; the more apocalyptic features a text contains, the more apocalyptic the text is.<sup>25</sup>

The purposes of apocalyptic revelation are accomplished by the consistent rhetorical strategy of shock and awe. This strategy makes the visions memorable and elicits a passionate response. The visions, narrative, dualism and repetition in apocalyptic literature embed themselves in the hearer/reader through “dazzling language.”<sup>26</sup> The imaginative process of picturing the vivid images portrayed in the visions served to make the content of the revelation unforgettable.<sup>27</sup> As Sandy says, it is crafted “for ease of memorization and recitation.”<sup>28</sup> The rhetorical effect of apocalyptic visions also calls for a response as intense as the visions themselves. As Ryken states, “Visionary literature, with its arresting strangeness, breaks through our normal way of thinking and shocks us into seeing that things are not as they appear.”<sup>29</sup> So the two purposes of apocalyptic literature, to reinterpret circumstances and change beliefs, are accomplished by the shock and awe resulting from highly symbolic visions of transcendent worlds.

Given the inclusion of the narrative framework and otherworldly messenger as defining characteristics, the portions of the Bible which are highly apocalyptic are very limited. In the OT Ezekiel 1:1–3:15, 8:1–11:24, 37:1–14, 40:1–48:35; Daniel 7–12, and

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<sup>25</sup> This also is helpful in delineating proto-apocalyptic literature from literature that is highly apocalyptic.

<sup>26</sup> Jeffrey D. Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2007), 182.

<sup>27</sup> David L. Barr, “The Apocalypse of John as Oral Enactment,” *Interpretation* 40, no. 3 (July 1986): 243.

<sup>28</sup> D. Brend Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 127.

<sup>29</sup> Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 169.

Zechariah 1-6 are apocalyptic. In the NT only the book of Revelation is apocalyptic. Portions of the Bible which deal with the end times but are not highly apocalyptic often are labeled apocalyptic because of their reference to cosmic eschatological events. Some examples of these kinds of passages are Isaiah 24-27 in the OT and Matthew 24 in the NT. Oracles of salvation or judgement within prophecy may refer to eschatological events, but they do not do so in the form of apocalypse. Utilizing the seven features above in the definition of apocalyptic, I will show how the texts listed above fit the definition of apocalyptic literature.

### Apocalypse in Daniel

#### *The Content of Daniel's Revelation*

The visions of Daniel in Daniel 7:1-12:13 display characteristics of apocalyptic literature and therefore are formally apocalyptic. Sparks calls the visions of Daniel “the only full-scale apocalypses in the Hebrew Bible.”<sup>30</sup> Daniel 7:1-12:13 is made up of four visions that are thematically related. Date formulas in Daniel 7:1, 8:1, 9:1, and 10:1 set each vision in the context of Israel’s exile in Babylon and Persia in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.

The content of apocalyptic revelation discloses the transcendent reality of eschatological salvation and the transcendent reality of heaven. Daniel’s visions display the reality of eschatological salvation in contrast with the oppression of God’s people. They are primarily concerned with the history of Israel between the Babylonian exile

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<sup>30</sup> Sparks, 240. I disagree with this assessment, as I think both Ezekiel and Zechariah’s visions clearly share the features of apocalyptic literature.

and the Greek and Roman empires. Kingdoms are the key recurring motif in the visions. In the visions, treatment of God's people will get worse over time until God's kingdom replaces these earthly kingdoms.

In Daniel's first vision the central focus is the revelation of eschatological salvation and the reality of heaven. Daniel is shown the throne room of heaven. In Daniel 7:9 he says, "As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. Furthermore, Daniel sees the presentation of a ruler to God in the heavenly throne room. In Daniel 7:13-14 he states,

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

Here this one like a son of man is presented before the throne of the Ancient of Days.

This divinely approved individual is given dominion over all people, and Daniel's vision pictures heaven and earth intersecting. While commentators disagree on the identity of this one "like a son of man," there is no doubt in the vision that he is a transcendent heavenly person, and is the one who will bring eschatological salvation to earth.

Daniel's second vision contains a brief reference to the reality of heaven. There the little horn of the goat becomes so great that in 8:10 it grew "to the host of heaven." Commentators agree that the context clearly indicates the identity of the little horn as Antiochus IV. The phrase צבא השמים is likely a reference to stars which stand for either earthly ruler or angelic beings. Furthermore, in 8:11 the little horn becomes as



great as the “Prince of the host” (שַׁרְהָצִבְאָא). Who is this prince? Most translations and commentators take this to be a reference to God or to a divine Messiah.<sup>31</sup> Either way, this heavenly host indicates “the transcendent dimension of the conflict between Antiochus and the Jews.”<sup>32</sup> This audacious ruler wouldn’t just oppress God’s people, but he would be engaged in open warfare with God. While not apparent on earth, Daniel’s second vision reveals this transcendent reality.

Daniel’s fourth vision gives his readers a glimpse of eschatological salvation in the form of resurrection. In Daniel 12:1 an angel tells Daniel that his people would be delivered. In fact, the angel Michael will intervene on behalf of God’s people. In 12:2-3 the angel says, “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.” The reference to God’s resurrected people shining like stars and the brightness of the sky at bare minimum indicates their resurrected bodies will be more exalted than their earthly bodies. Collins and others take this to mean that they will have bodies like angels.<sup>33</sup> In either instance, God’s people will be redeemed and resurrected. Here they get a glimpse of the

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<sup>31</sup> The ESV, HCSB, NASB, NET, NLV, RSV and NLT all have a capitalized substantive for שַׁרְהָצִבְאָא (“Prince” or “Commander”), indicating deity. The NIV and NRSV do not use a capitalized substantive, thus indicating openness to interpreting this leader as the high priest or some other leader.

<sup>32</sup> Ernest C. Lucas, *Daniel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 215.

<sup>33</sup> John J. Collins, *Daniel with an Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1984), loc. 1762, Kindle. Collins cites 1 Enoch 104:2 where the redeemed “shall shine like the lights of heaven.”

transcendent reality of salvation in the form of having glorious, luminous bodies in the future.

### *The Form of Daniel's Revelation*

Daniel's revelations are in the form of visions that use highly symbolic language (fortunately most of these symbols are explained within the visions). Daniel's first vision is of four different beasts which stand for four earthly kingdoms (Dan 7:2-8, 23-27). The fourth beast has eleven horns which stand for eleven kings (Dan 7:24). Daniel's second vision is of a ram with two horns and a goat with a horn between his eyes that breaks and then four other horns grown in its place only to be replaced by a little horn. The ram and goat symbolize Media/Persia and Greece (Dan 8:20-21). The goat's horn is Alexander the Great, the four horns are his four generals who divided his kingdom (Dan 8:22). The little horn is Antiochus IV (Dan 8:23-26).

Daniel's third vision is a response to Daniel's prayer of confession in Daniel 9:3-19. The answer is given by the angel Gabriel, and he explicitly calls the answer a vision (מַרְאֵה) in Daniel 9:23. This vision describes seventy weeks, or sevens, of years. It is likely that this vision does not use symbolic language, but rather gives details of what will happen at certain points during the seventy weeks of years.

Daniel's fourth vision is a prophecy of the end of the Persian empire in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC and the ensuing rulers until Antiochus IV in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. This prophecy is explicitly called a vision in Daniel 10:1 (again with the Hebrew word מַרְאֵה). This vision does not use symbols, but in its conclusion it does use figurative

language. For example, God's resurrected people will "shine like the brightness of the sky above" (Dan 12:3).

Daniel's visions are also given within a narrative framework. The narrative framework includes a description of where, and often when, the prophet received the vision. Furthermore, the narrative framework reports the prophet's interaction with any other-worldly mediators, usually to explain the vision. Frequently in the narrative the prophet is asked to participate in the vision. Daniel's four visions are all given in a narrative framework. He tells us that at least his first vision was given as he was in bed (Dan 7:1). Later, in Daniel 7:16, Daniel says he "approached one of those who stood there and asked him the truth concerning all this." Thus Daniel is interacting with a mediator in the vision.

In Daniel's second vision he is transported to the Ulai Canal in Susa. Susa was the administrative capital of the Persian empire, and it was about two hundred miles east of Babylon. Daniel witnesses the ram and the goat of this vision do battle, and then in 8:15 an angel mediator appears to him and speaks to him. The mediator "came near" where Daniel was (Dan 8:17). After he spoke to Daniel, Daniel fell asleep. The angel touched Daniel and stood him up (Dan 8:18). After the vision, Daniel reports that he was sick for days (Dan 8:27).

Daniel's third vision is also given in a narrative framework. In this case, the narrative framework is more highlighted than the vision itself. Daniel explains that in 538 BC, the year when Persia officially displaced Babylon, he "perceived in the books the numbers of years" of the exile as prophesied in Jeremiah (Dan 9:2). Daniel thus

turned to God in a prayer of confession on behalf of Israel. While Daniel was praying, God answered his prayer by sending the angel Gabriel who gave Daniel a vision (Dan 9:20-27). Daniel explains that Gabriel came at the normal time of evening sacrifice at the temple in Jerusalem (Dan 9:21), which is significant because the temple had been destroyed due the very sin which Daniel was confessing to God. In this case the vision of the seventy weeks of years is the answer to Daniel's prayer. The prayer encompasses seventeen verses (Dan 9:3-19), while the vision is only four verses (Dan 9:24-27).

Daniel's fourth vision was given as he "was mourning for three weeks" (Dan 10:2). He was on the banks of the Tigris river in Babylon when he saw this vision (Dan 10:4-5). He relates that the men with him did not see the vision (Dan 10:7). He was weakened by the vision, and fell asleep. Once again the mediator of the vision touched Daniel and comforted him (Dan 10:10-11). This happened again, and only then was Daniel ready to hear the rest of the vision (Dan 10:18-19). At the end of the lengthy vision, Daniel saw two other angelic mediators on the banks of the Tigris (Dan 12:5). They went on to speak about the vision, and Daniel participates in the conversation (Dan 12:6-12).

### *The Method of Daniel's Revelation*

Apocalyptic revelation is delivered by the unique method of an otherworldly mediator who gives visions and interpretations. This mediator guides the recipient of the vision, and will also give instruction as needed. Daniel's visions all have an otherworldly mediator. In his first vision, the mediator is not introduced until Daniel 7:16, sixteen verses into the vision. Daniel says, "I approached one of those who stood

there and asked him the truth concerning all this. So he told me and made known to me the interpretation of the things.” According to 9:21, this angel is Gabriel. Given that 7:13-14 relates the presentation of one like a son of man before the throne of God, perhaps this mediator was standing in the heavenly courtroom.

Daniel’s second vision is also mediated by an angelic being. He describes two mediators in 8:13 as holy ones (each is called שְׁכָנִים קְדוֹת). One of them directly addresses Daniel in Daniel 8:14. Furthermore, one of those two holy ones, or perhaps a different one, appeared to Daniel in 8:15, “And behold, there stood before me one having the appearance of a man.” It is possible that this was Gabriel, as the Hebrew word used for man here is גִּבּוֹר, which means “mighty one” and is part of the name Gabriel (גַּבְרִיאֵל). This mediator came to Daniel on the bank of the canal and explained the vision to him.

The otherworldly mediator in Daniel’s third vision is identified as the angel Gabriel (Dan 9:21). Gabriel interrupts Daniel’s prayer in order to provide an answer in the form of the vision of the seventy weeks of years. He is sent to help Daniel understand (Dan 9:22), and gives him a vision (מַחְזָן, Dan 9:23).

Finally, in Daniel’s fourth vision, he sees a mediator while with a group of men on the banks of the Tigris river (Dan 10:5-7). The mediator is identified either as an angel, or as a theophany. Ezekiel 1:26-28 and Revelation 1:12-16 both use similar terms to describe theophanies.<sup>34</sup> This mediator touches Daniel both in Daniel 10:10 and

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<sup>34</sup> Whitcomb states, “The resemblance of the description of the glory of the Lord in Ezekiel 1:26-28 and in Revelation 1:12-16 is so undeniably clear that exceedingly powerful theological arguments would have to be provided to overthrow such an identification,” John C. Whitcomb, *Daniel* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1985), 138. The majority of commentators take this as an angel, see Hill, *Daniel*, 180.

10:18 to encourage and strengthen him. At the conclusion of the vision Daniel sees two other mediators on the banks of the Tigris (Dan 12:5). One of them speaks to the primary mediator (Dan 12:6). He furthermore concludes the book with final instructions to Daniel in Daniel 12:9-12.

### *The Purpose of Daniel's Revelation*

Daniel's four visions also exhibit the two purposes of apocalyptic literature: to reinterpret circumstances in light of transcendent reality and to effect change in belief and action by virtue of God's authority. In many apocalyptic works these purposes are stated explicitly. Daniel, however, does not do so. Rather, these purposes are made clear through the clear temporal markers for each vision and the cumulative message and conclusion.

Daniel's four visions were given in 553 BC, 550 BC, 539/38 BC, and 536 BC, respectively (cf. Dan 7:1, 8:1, 9:1, and 10:1). Israel was still in exile in Babylon when each vision was given. Furthermore, the date of each vision corresponds with a significant geo-political shift that had potential to impact Israel's future. Daniel's first vision was given in 553 BC when Belshazzar began to function as co-regent of Babylon with Nabonidus. Changes in rulers meant exposure for people in exile. Belshazzar is the ruler who blasphemously insulted God by drinking from the holy vessels taken from the temple in Jerusalem in Daniel 5:3-4. According to Daniel 5:30, his arrogance and aggressive mockery of God resulted in his death in 539 BC. In the general context of Daniel, king Nebuchadnezzar had been humbled by God and acknowledged God's reign

and sovereignty (Dan 4:34-37). Belshazzar refused to humble himself (Dan 5:22-23).

Thus he clearly represented a greater threat to Israel while in exile. The vision of chapter seven clarifies that not only will Babylon pass, but three more kingdoms will as well. Furthermore, Israel should have hope give the coming one “like a son of man” who is introduced in the heavenly throne room (Dan 7:9-10, 13-14). Thus, given the transcendent reality of God’s kingdom and its guaranteed arrival on earth, Israel need not fear while in exile.

Daniel’s second vision is also given during the reign of Belshazzar, in 550 BC. Hill notes that this was a momentous year geo-politically, as it was the year that the Persian king Cyrus “broke free from his alliance to Astyages the Mede and established the joint kingdom of the Medes and Persians.”<sup>35</sup> Cyrus would be the one who would send Israel home from exile, yet even that blessing did not mean smooth sailing for Israel. The vision details the suffering of God’s people under the little horn, Antiochus IV. The vision concludes on a note of hope, as the little horn “will be broken—but by no human hand” (Dan 8:25). This vision develops the message of the first. More kingdoms are to come, and more suffering will come for Israel. Yet Israel need not lose hope or faith. God will not allow them to suffer indefinitely.

The date of Daniel’s third vision is 539/38 BC. This is the year when the Persian empire officially displaced the Babylonian empire. There are difficulties in identifying exactly who Darius is in this chapter, but whomever he is, the point of the vision in light of the date is clear: “The immediate purpose of ch. 9 is to assure the persecuted

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<sup>35</sup> Hill, *Daniel*, 146.

Hebrews of the Babylonian Diaspora that the time of the exile is almost over; the seventy years of Jeremiah's prophecy are about to be fulfilled."<sup>36</sup> Israel needed to see their exile in light of God's revealed vision of the seventy weeks of years. There is irony here, as the exile was prophesied in Jeremiah as seventy years. Thus, the rebuilding of Jerusalem will take much longer than a few years, and it will include more trials for God's people.

Daniel's last vision was given in 536 BC. Zerubbabel would have returned to Jerusalem in the previous year (cf. Ezra 3). This was a great moment of celebration, and yet at the same time the consistent message of Daniel's visions remain: God's people are not yet done suffering. This vision, as the culminating vision of the book, is meant to prepare God's people for the suffering they will face over the course of the next four hundred years, with an emphasis again on the reign of Antiochus IV in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. Once again, the vision gives hope, and offers an alternate interpretation for Israel's trials and tribulations yet to come.

Daniel's visions do not offer explicit calls for changes of behavior and belief until the final vision. First, when Daniel is told of the coming resurrection of the dead there is an emphasis on two eternal fates: life or contempt (Dan 12:2). This implicitly challenges the reader to consider which fate is his or hers. Will they be resurrected to life? If not, why not? Second, in the final exhortation given to Daniel, the mediating angel says, "Many shall purify themselves and make themselves white and be refined,

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<sup>36</sup> Hill, *Daniel*, 158.



but the wicked shall act wickedly. And none of the wicked shall understand, but those who are wise shall understand.”

This riddle is an indirect exhortation. The wicked are warned to change, and the wise are challenged to grasp the message of the visions and act accordingly. Thus the wise understand the visions to be the Word of God to them, and should change their beliefs and actions as needed.

The content, form, method, and purpose of Daniel’s visions show that they are apocalyptic literature.

### Apocalypse in Ezekiel

#### *The Content of Ezekiel's Revelation*

Ezekiel contains four passages that are potentially apocalyptic: Ezekiel 1:4-3:15, 8:1-11:24, 37:1-14, and 40:1-48:35. Ezekiel provides chronological notes for different sections of his work. From 1:1-3 we learn that he was taken captive by Babylon and exiled in the 597 BC deportation. He was a priest, and ministered to Israel in Babylon in the period of the exile, from 597-573 BC. Chapters 1-24 were written from 593-589 BC. Chapters 29-32 were written from 587-585 BC (with the exception of 29:17-30:19). Chapters 33-48 were written from 585-573 BC.<sup>37</sup> For all of his visions, Israel is in exile in Babylon. For the last two visions, 37:1-14 and 40:1-48:35, Israel’s temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed.

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<sup>37</sup> Ralph H. Alexander, *Ezekiel*, vol. 7, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Jeremiah-Ezekiel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 647.

The primary category of apocalyptic features in a text relates to the content of the revelation. Regarding content, apocalyptic texts disclose eschatological salvation and the transcendent reality of heaven. Ezekiel's revelations contain several dramatic visions of eschatological salvation. These visions naturally involve the restoration of the people to the land of Israel and the restoration of the temple and of Jerusalem.

In the climatic vision of the book, chapters 40-48, Ezekiel sees a man measuring a city and a temple. The city is never called Jerusalem. Rather, it is now called "The Lord is there" (48:35). The glory of the Lord fills this new temple (44:4), as Ezekiel had seen God's glory leave the temple (9:3, 10:4, 10:18-19, 11:22-23). In this renewed Jerusalem a river flows out of the temple to the east down to the Dead Sea (47:1-12). The desert of Israel will become lush and full of food. The Dead Sea will be full of fish and a center of fishing commerce. Furthermore, the tribes of Israel are given their tribal allotments once more.

Interpreters disagree about the symbolic nature of this vision. Premillennial interpreters believe Ezekiel sees the actual, literal land of Israel, renewed Jerusalem, and temple. Some premillennial interpreters believe this vision represents the new Jerusalem and that the tribes are representative of all believers in all time. Most amillennial interpreters think the vision represents the church as it is today and will ultimately be.

In all of these interpretations, the vision does not depict the current reality of Israel's situation in exile in Babylon. The literal and some symbolic interpretations of Ezekiel 40-48 hold that this is an end times view of Israel's restoration. In the a-

millennial interpretation, the church is presented as the ultimate eschatological fulfillment of God's restoration of Israel. The key point is that in each approach to interpreting Ezekiel 40-48 the vision discloses Israel's ultimate salvation and restoration.

The disclosure of eschatological salvation in Ezekiel is not limited to the return to the land and restoration of the temple. It also includes the dramatic presentation of the Spirit of God indwelling his people and spiritual renewal. In Ezekiel 37:11-14 God says to Ezekiel,

Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD.

This vision includes Israel being placed in her own land, but it emphasizes spiritual resurrection. While this prophecy receives initial fulfillment on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, it has yet to be fulfilled in its entirety. As such, the vision looks forward to the eschatological salvation of Israel.

Ezekiel 1:4-3:15 does not explicitly include the disclosure of revelation regarding eschatological salvation. However, the author presents Ezekiel as a unified collection of visions in 1:1, "as I was among the exiles by the Chebar canal, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God." Several other connections between the visions in Ezekiel show that they are meant to be taken together. The angels described as living creatures and cherubim appear in the first and second visions. The glory of the Lord that departs from the temple in the second vision returns to the new temple in the fourth

vision. These connections show that although given at different times, these visions present a unified message of the ultimate eschatological salvation of Israel.

The second feature of the content of apocalyptic revelation is the disclosure of the reality of heaven. This is one of the most notable and familiar features of Ezekiel's visions. In Ezekiel 1:4-3:15 God discloses the transcendent reality of heaven in a vision of the heavenly throne room. Note Ezekiel 1:26, "And above the expanse over their heads there was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness with a human appearance." Ezekiel also sees "living creatures" with wings that carry the throne of God (1:13). These living creatures are described in 10:15 as "cherubim," a word used for angelic beings. The term כְּרוּב is used of angelic beings who have a variety of functions. They are associated with God's throne in Exodus 25:18-20 as they are sculpted on the ark of the covenant, God's footstool. In Genesis 3:24 they "prevent sinners from grasping at immortality."<sup>38</sup>

In 8:1-11:24 Ezekiel witnesses abominations in the temple in Jerusalem and the consequential departure of God's glory from the temple (9:3, 10:4, 10:18-19, 11:22-23). Thus he has glimpses of God's heavenly glory while seeing sin in Jerusalem. He sees the cherubim again with the throne of God in 10:1, "Then I looked, and behold, on the expanse that was over the heads of the cherubim there appeared above them something like a sapphire, in appearance like a throne." This is the heart of apocalyptic literature: the intersection of heavenly and earthly realities.

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<sup>38</sup> Stephen F. Noll, "כְּרוּב," vol. 2, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 709, Accordance edition.

Interpreters vary in their identification of what Ezekiel sees in his last vision (40:1-48:35). Those who take the vision literally argue that Ezekiel sees Israel in the millennial kingdom, or possibly the New Jerusalem. Those who take this final vision symbolically believe it represents the church age, or possibly the new earth, and new Jerusalem. In Ezekiel 43:7 he hears a voice coming out of this new temple which says, “Son of man, this is the place of my throne and the place of the soles of my feet, where I will dwell in the midst of the people of Israel forever.” Even if the literal view is taken, God intends for Israel to envision his dwelling with them in this temple forever. This is underlined by the final words of the book, where he says, “And the name of the city from that time on shall be, The LORD Is There” (48:35).

The content of these four sections of Ezekiel fit well with the features of apocalyptic literature. The next category of apocalyptic features is the form of the revelation.

#### *The Form of Ezekiel's Revelation*

The two features of the form of revelation in apocalyptic literature are visionary revelation with highly symbolic language and a narrative framework for the vision. The revelation in Ezekiel 1:4-3:15 is definitely in the form of a vision. Ezekiel says in 1:1, “I saw visions of God.” While this refers to the entire book of Ezekiel, 1:1-3:15 are included. In Ezekiel 1:4 he states, “As I looked, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north...” In the clause “As I looked,” Ezekiel uses the verb *ראה*, commonly used in other apocalyptic works at the outset of the prophet’s description of the vision. For

example, in Zechariah 1-6 the verb **ראה** occurs sixteen times, at least five times in formulas introducing his night visions (in English translations, Zech 1:18, 2:1, 3:1, 5:1, and 6:1).

Ezekiel's first vision is characterized by highly figurative and symbolic language. Ezekiel is given a scroll that represents the divine message of judgment for sin (2:8). He eats the scroll, symbolic of his assimilation of the message, and it is sweet (3:1-3; cf. Ps 19:10). The beating wings of the angels as they carry the throne sound like an earthquake (3:12-13).

In the second vision of Ezekiel he describes where he was as he has the vision: "In the sixth year, in the sixth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I sat in my house, with the elders of Judah sitting before me, the hand of the Lord GOD fell upon me there. Then I looked, and behold, a form that had the appearance of a man" (8:1-2). As in 1:4, Ezekiel again uses the verb **ראה** to describe his action combined with the declaration **הִנֵּה** ("behold"). Furthermore, in Ezekiel 8:4 he refers to 1:4-3:15 as a vision (**מַרְאֵה**). These features clearly identify the revelation as a vision.

This vision also contains highly symbolic language. Ezekiel sees the temple in Jerusalem, but its walls are engraved with "all the idols of the household of Israel" (8:10). This represents Israel's idolatry, even though no such engravings literally existed. In 10:2 Ezekiel sees the angelic mediator scatter burning coals of purifying judgment all across the city.

In Ezekiel's third vision he does not use "I looked and behold" the formula. Instead, he states in 37:1 "The hand of the LORD was upon me." This is significant

because a very similar formula is also used in 8:1, “the hand of the Lord GOD fell upon me” to introduce a vision. Also, he describes the Spirit of God bringing him to a valley full of dry bones. This language is used in other visions (3:12, 14, 8:3, 11:1, 11:24, 43:5). The visionary nature of this revelation is confirmed when the bones regrow flesh and come to life (37:10).

Ezekiel’s third vision is explicitly marked as symbolic. In 37:11 Ezekiel God says to Ezekiel, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.’” Thus the bones are used as a symbol because Israel believes their hope to be as dead as dry bones.

Ezekiel 40:1-48:35 is explicitly referred to as visions (תִּזְמוֹנֹת) in 40:2, “In visions of God he brought me to the land of Israel, and set me down on a very high mountain...” As mentioned above, commentators disagree about the highly symbolic and figurative language. Some interpreters attribute symbolic meaning to the entire section, while others insist on a strictly literal interpretation. Images such as the temple could easily be figurative for the church, or for the New Jerusalem.

Ezekiel’s visions are also given in a narrative framework. With regard to a narrative framework is key that Ezekiel does not simply receive the oracle.<sup>39</sup> In the visions of Ezekiel he is taken places, shown things, and even must act. As he reports these visions in narrative framework, he does not merely say “Thus says the Lord.” He tells the story of his vision.

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<sup>39</sup> Collins, “Morphology,” 9.

The narrative framework of the revelation is clear in Ezekiel 1:1-3:15. Ezekiel sees the vision of the throne of God (1:4-28), falls on his face (1:28), hears a voice speaking to him (1:28-2:1), is set on his feet (2:2), is given a scroll by a mysterious hand (2:9), eats the scroll (3:2), and is lifted up and carried away (3:14-15).

Ezekiel's second vision begins with him literally sitting in his house with the elders of Judah, then he says "the hand of the Lord God fell upon me there" (8:1). At that point a man appears to him with a waist of fine and a shining, metal chest (8:2). This figure grabs Ezekiel by his hair and the Spirit lifted him "between earth and heaven" and show him Jerusalem (8:3). He subsequently is taken to a gate of the city, the court of the temple, and the temple itself. He dramatically witnesses the departure of the glory of God from the temple in phases. While he has the vision, he prophesied and told the elders of Judah what he had seen. Apparently, during this prophesying, one of the elders died on the spot (11:13). At the conclusion of the vision, Ezekiel is returned to the exiles (11:24).

Ezekiel's third vision is perhaps his most famous narrative. Once again, the "hand of the Lord" came upon him. The Spirit "brought" him (אצ') to a valley filled with dry bones (37:1). The Spirit "led" Ezekiel around the valley, giving him a tour (37:2). Ezekiel prophesies to the bones, and they come to life (37:7-10).

Ezekiel's fourth vision is also narrative. As in the other visions, "the hand of the Lord" came upon him and he was brought (אב') to the city of Jerusalem. He witnesses a man measuring the the city and the temple. Then, Ezekiel is brought to the outer court (40:17). As the vision proceeded, he is taken to all sides of the city, and into the courts



of the temple and the temple itself. He eventually is led east of the city as his guide measures a river flowing eastward out of the temple (47:3).

### *The Method of Ezekiel's Revelation*

The third feature of apocalyptic literature regards the method of the revelation; the revelation is given with the assistance of an other-worldly mediator, usually an angel. All four of Ezekiel's visions have such a feature. The message to Ezekiel in 1:4-3:15 is mediated by an other worldly being, in this case God himself or an angel speaking on behalf of God. In 2:1, after seeing the glory of the Lord and falling to his face, someone spoke to Ezekiel: "And he said to me, 'Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak with you.'" In Ezekiel 2:9 he sees a hand reach out to give him a scroll.

In Ezekiel's second vision he sees the form of a man with a flaming waste and a chest of shining metal (8:2). That man picked up Ezekiel by his hair and carried him to Jerusalem (8:3). He further spoke to him and told Ezekiel where to look (8:5, 6).

In Ezekiel's third vision the Lord himself leads him around the valley of dry bones and speaks to him (37:2, 3). In Ezekiel's fourth vision he is taken by the Spirit to Jerusalem and there he sees a man whose appearance, in 40:3, "was like bronze" and who subsequently guides him through a thorough tour of a renewed Jerusalem and the temple.

### *The Purpose of Ezekiel's Revelation*

The final two features of apocalyptic literature have to do with two specific purposes for the revelation. Apocalyptic texts are intended to reinterpret circumstances in light of the transcendent reality of heaven and the spiritual world and to effect change in belief and action by virtue of divine authority. We see both of these purposes for each of Ezekiel's four visions.

Ezekiel's first vision is intended to juxtapose Israel's condition in Babylonian exile with God's glory and his future rescue and restoration of Israel. Ezekiel's prophecy as a whole is given to Israel while in exile in Babylon. The consistent chronological markers in the book serve to firmly anchor the message in that context. In the midst of the suffering and hopelessness of exile, Ezekiel's visions explain the divine reasoning behind the exile and give a message of hope for the future. Ezekiel makes this clear by the introduction in Ezekiel 1:1, "...as I was among the exiles by the Chebar canal, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God." His literal circumstances while receiving the visions and prophetic messages from God for Israel was in exile. His first vision is of God's heavenly throne. The contrast of sitting by a canal in Babylon and God's transcendent throne is the crucial to the purpose: God is still on this throne even though Israel is in Babylon. The reality of God's glory and sovereignty is intended to help Israel reinterpret being in exile.

The second purpose of apocalyptic literature is to effect change in belief and action by virtue of divine authority. This is made explicit in Ezekiel 1:4-3:15. God instructs Ezekiel in 3:4-7,

Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with my words to them. For you are not sent to a people of foreign speech and a hard language, but to the house of Israel— not to many peoples of foreign speech and a hard language, whose words you cannot understand. Surely, if I sent you to such, they would listen to you. But the house of Israel will not be willing to listen to you, for they are not willing to listen to me: because all the house of Israel have a hard forehead and a stubborn heart.

Paradoxically, by warning Ezekiel that his hearers will not respond to his message, God implicitly calls them to repent.<sup>40</sup> By virtue of God's authority, Ezekiel is to be a messenger of repentance and hope to a people who will struggle to respond.

Both purposes of apocalyptic literature are apparent in Ezekiel's second vision. The first purpose is to reinterpret Israel's exile in light of God's judgment of sin. Specifically, this vision focuses on interpreting the impending destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. In this vision, dated to 592 BC, the elders of Judah are sitting in his house in exile (8:1). While there he is visited by an angelic messenger who gave him a vision of Jerusalem. Ezekiel sees sinful idolatry in Jerusalem and even in the temple itself. This vision provides an explanation for Israel's current circumstance of being in exile, and for the coming destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon in just eight years. He furthermore witnesses the consequential removal of the Spirit of God from the temple and Jerusalem. The juxtaposition of Ezekiel and Israel's reality in Babylon with the visionary revelation about Jerusalem is intentional. The vision serves as a grid for interpreting the reality. Indeed, one of the elders of Judah drops dead in Ezekiel's house while he was having the vision (11:13)! Either his death serves as verification that the judgment in the vision will indeed occur, or he is judged because he participated in the

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<sup>40</sup> Part of Ezekiel's prophetic message is to explain how a people who will not repent will finally do so, as envisioned in chapter 37.

idolatry described in the vision. Either way, the vision was granted to explain the reality of Israel.

The second purpose of changing belief and action in light of divine authority the second vision is clear as Ezekiel witnesses Israel engaged in idolatry in Jerusalem and in the temple. Multiple times God announces the guilt of Israel and his intention to judge (8:17-18, 9:9, etc.). This vision is given in 592 BC (cf. Ezek 8:1). Thus Ezekiel is instructed to prophesy of the impending destruction of Jerusalem to those already in exile. The purpose is to cause Israel to repent of their sin and return to God. This is made explicit in Ezekiel 11:19-21,

And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. But as for those whose heart goes after their detestable things and their abominations, I will bring their deeds upon their own heads, declares the Lord GOD.

Those who refuse to repent are warned of judgment, while God promises deliverance by virtue of soft hearts. The chilling vision of judgment is meant to produce repentance and faith in the Israelites in exile. God's authoritative word will result in Jerusalem's destruction, and yet it will also result in Israel's restoration.

Ezekiel's third vision is given after the temple had been destroyed by Babylon in 586 BC. The first purpose of this dramatic vision of the resurrection of the dry bones is to reinterpret Israel's time in exile in light of their future hope of rescue by God. In the explanation of the vision the symbol of the bones is explained as "the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost'" (37:11). Yet the word of God to Israel is "I will open your graves and raise you from your graves... I will bring you into the land of Israel" (37:12). Furthermore, God says through Ezekiel

“I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land” (37:14). Premillennial interpreters take this to be a prophecy of a physical restoration and then a spiritual restoration. A-millennial interpreters take this to be a prophecy merely of spiritual restoration. Again, in either interpretive scheme the purpose of the vision is to reinterpret the hopelessness of Israel’s condition in exile in light of the God’s promised saving work.

The second purpose of Ezekiel’s third vision is to change belief and action. As the vision of the dry bones is explained in 37:11-14, Ezekiel is told by God “And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people.” The emphasis on knowledge, repeated again in 37:14, is meant to change Israel’s beliefs regarding who God is. This should lead to the replacement of hopelessness (37:11) with hope in God (37:14). God’s divine word is powerful enough to restore dry bones to life, and thus he will restore Israel.

Both purposes of apocalyptic literature are clear in Ezekiel’s final vision in chapters 40-48. This vision is also dated after the destruction of the temple by Babylon (573 BC, cf. Eek. 40:1). In light of the loss of the temple Ezekiel sees a rebuilt temple and the Spirit of God return once again. He also sees the restoration of the land physically, and the allotments of land for each tribe. The purpose of the vision is once again to reinterpret Israel’s condition in exile in light of God’s promised rescue and restoration of the people and the land. The temple may have been destroyed, but Ezekiel’s vision offers a glorious future for Israel.

The second apocalyptic purpose, to change belief and action in light of divine authority, is explicit in Ezekiel's fourth vision. Ezekiel is told, "describe to the house of Israel the temple, that they may be ashamed of their iniquities; and they shall measure the plan" (43:10). Israel should be ashamed of their sin, and this vision is meant to produce that shame. He commands the leaders of Israel, "Enough, O princes of Israel! Put away violence and oppression, and execute justice and righteousness" (Ezek 45:9). By virtue of God's authority, evident in the vision of Israel's restoration, Israel should repent of their sin and change their behavior. It is God's grace that gives Israel hope that such repentance and change is possible.

Ezekiel's four visions exhibit each of the seven features of apocalyptic literature. While the entire work is not composed in the form of apocalyptic literature, the four key visions are. Indeed, Ezekiel's prophetic oracles and messages are dependent on the visionary revelation granted to him by the Spirit of God.

### Apocalypse in Zechariah

#### *Content of Zechariah's Revelation*

Zechariah 1:7-6:15 is made up of eight visions which are potentially apocalyptic. Zechariah ministered to Israel at the end of the exile. He relates that he received the visions on February 15, 519 BC (Zech 1:7). The work on rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem had begun five months prior to his visions. As a group, Zechariah's visions display the seven characteristics that are indicative of apocalyptic literature.

The eight visions of Zechariah, like the visions of Ezekiel, are intended to be understood as a cohesive unit. Two observations confirm that these eight visions are a coherent whole. First, the visions are given on the same night: “On the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month, which is the month of Shebat, in the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, son of Iddo, saying, ‘I saw in the night, and behold...’” (Zech 1:7-8a).

The next date formula occurs in 7:1, introducing the next part of the book. The implication is that all of the visions between 1:7 and 7:1 were given on the same night. This is confirmed by Zechariah 4:1, “And the angel who talked with me came again and woke me like a man who is awakened out of his sleep.” Second, in the visions Zechariah refers to the same angelic mediator and guide. For example, in Zechariah 6:4 he describes his angelic mediator as “the angel who talked with me.” The participial phrase *הַדֹּבֵר בִּי* indicates that the angel in the eighth vision is the same angel who had been speaking to him in the other visions. Again, in Zechariah 4:1 he says, “And the angel who talked with me came again and woke me...” The identification of the angel as the one “who talked with” him and the use of the adverb “again” both indicate the continuity of the angelic mediator. Taken together, these visions exhibit each of the seven characteristics of apocalyptic literature.

The content of apocalyptic visions discloses two transcendent realities: eschatological salvation and the transcendent reality of heaven. First, Zechariah’s visions reveal eschatological salvation, but they also focus on eschatological judgment

of God's enemies. Judgment of God's enemies (and thus the enemies of God's people) goes hand in hand with eschatological salvation.

Zechariah reveals eschatological salvation in several instances. In his first vision he sees men riding on different colored horses who patrol the earth. The idea is these horses and riders report to God what is happening, and thus God has not forgotten his people. Thus as the first vision concludes the Lord says in Zechariah 1:17, "My cities shall again overflow with prosperity, and the LORD will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem." While the vision is not of cities prospering, the vision of the four horsemen is meant to assure that Israel will again be rescued, rebuilt, and restored. In his third vision Zechariah sees a man measuring Jerusalem. Zechariah is told to tell the man Jerusalem will be so big it won't have walls (2:4). Furthermore, God says in 2:5, "I will be to her a wall of fire all around... and I will be the glory in her midst." This vision thus discloses the ultimate glorious future of Jerusalem.

As with Zechariah's fourth vision, his seventh vision involves the removal of sin as a woman in a basket being removed from the land of Israel (Zech 5:6-8). Two flying women carry the basket on to "Shinar," a throwback term for Babylon. The idea is that guilt for sin will be removed and put where it belongs. The removal of sin is a key aspect of eschatological salvation; what got Israel sent into exile in the first place will be entirely removed.

Zechariah also reveals eschatological judgment as a complement to eschatological salvation. In his second vision he sees the horns (symbolizing nations) that judged Judah. He further sees craftsmen who have come "to cast down the horns of the nations



who lifted up their horns against the land of Judah” (Zech 1:21). He also sees a vision of eschatological judgment in his sixth vision. He sees a flying scroll which describes every deed of every person. In Zechariah 5:4 this scroll enters the homes of the wicked and destroys them.

Second, Zechariah’s visions reveal the transcendent reality of heaven. This is not as clear cut as in the case of Ezekiel, but nonetheless Zechariah is given glimpses of the glorious future of heaven. The vision of man measuring Jerusalem probably communicates the glory of the New Jerusalem, “I will be to her a wall of fire all around... and I will be the glory in her midst” (Zech 2:5). That this statement refers to the New Jerusalem is confirmed by Revelation 21:3, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.”

In Zechariah’s fourth vision he sees the heavenly throne room with Joshua the high priest “standing before the angel of the Lord” and Satan standing there to accuse him (Zech 3:1). In Zechariah 3:2 the Lord himself speaks to Satan. That this vision reveals heaven is clear when compared with Satan’s appearance before God and accusation of Job in Job 1:6-12. In the vision Joshua’s dirty clothes are removed and replaced with pure, holy clothes symbolizing the removal of his sin. This dramatic transformation occurs in the heavenly throne room.

Zechariah’s fifth vision may be a vision of the heavenly temple’s lamp stand. The lamp stand is not necessarily the menorah of the temple (with seven branches), but a

pedestal which can hold seven lamps. Given that the rebuilding of the temple is a main feature of this vision, the temple may very well be in view.

### *The Form of Zechariah's Revelation*

The form of Zechariah's visions matches the pattern of apocalyptic literature. These visions are given using highly symbolic language and in a narrative framework. Zechariah's visions are filled with vivid, symbolic language. In Zechariah's first vision he sees four horsemen on different colored horses (Zech 1:8). He is told that these "are they whom the Lord has send to patrol the earth" (Zech 1:10). In his second vision Zechariah sees four horns and craftsmen (Zech 1:18, 20). They stand for the nations that destroyed Judah and for those who will destroy those nations, respectively (Zech 1:19, 21). In the third vision Zechariah sees a man measuring Jerusalem (Zech 2:1). That act symbolizes the glorious future Jerusalem will have without measurable walls (Zech 2:5). In Zechariah's fourth vision he sees Joshua the high priest given clean clothes which represent the removal of his sin (Zech 3:1-5). He also sees a stone set before Joshua with seven eyes, possibly the capstone or cornerstone of the temple (Zech 3:9). The seven eyes probably represent God's watching over the building of the temple. Zechariah's fifth vision is a vision of a golden lamp stand and two olive trees (Zech 4:2-3). The lamp stand symbolizes God's Spirit enabling Zerubbabel to complete the building of the temple (Zech 4:6). The olive trees symbolize two anointed people, probably Joshua the high priest and Zerubbabel the Davidic leader of Israel (Zech 4:14). In Zechariah's sixth vision he sees a flying scroll that destroys the homes of the wicked

(Zech 5:1, 4). Zechariah's seventh vision is of a woman in a basket being flown by two other women with wings away from Israel (Zech 5:7-9). The woman in the basket is wickedness being removed from Israel (Zech 5:8). Finally, Zechariah's eighth vision is of four chariots being pulled by multicolored horses. These are probably related to the horses of the first vision, and are sent to patrol the earth (Zech 6:7).

Zechariah's visions also are given in a narrative framework. He is not simply told the message God wants him to deliver to Israel, he is shown visions of active symbols. Thus in Zechariah 1:8 he tells us that he received the visions at night. He makes that clear again in Zechariah 4:1 where he tells us that the angel woke him from sleep to give him the vision. He sees horses and chariots drawn by horses patrolling the earth (Zech 1:8-17; 6:1-8). He is shown a man measuring Jerusalem in Zechariah 2:12. He speaks to the man, and is told by the angel "Run and say to that young man..." (Zech 2:4). He not only sees the visions, but he also participates in them. In Zechariah 3:1-5 he sees Joshua the high priest given new clothes. In his fifth vision he sees a golden lamp stand fed oil by two olive trees standing next to it (Zech 4:12). In his sixth vision a giant flying scroll enters and destroys the homes of the wicked (Zech 5:1-4). In his seventh vision a woman in a basket is carried off by two women with wings (Zech 5:5-9).

#### *The Method of Zechariah's Revelation*

Revelation in Apocalyptic literature is mediated by an other worldly being. This is another apocalyptic characteristic where Zechariah's visions fit the mold exactly. In

Zechariah's first night vision he sees a man riding on a red horse in a glen with three colored horses behind him (Zech 1:8). The idea may be that the other horses also have riders as well, but that isn't made clear in the vision. In the next verse Zechariah asks about the horses to "my lord" (Zech 1:9). He uses the term אֲדֹנָי, which here probably means "sir."<sup>41</sup> This sir is then described as "the angel who talked with me" (הַמַּלְאָךְ הַדֹּבֵר בִּי). Some scholars think this is the rider on the red horse, while others think this is simply another angel. Either way, this angel continues to appear throughout the visions, and is probably the one who wakes him up in Zechariah 4:1. He asks the mediating angel questions throughout the visions, and the angel offers explanations and clarifications of the symbols (e.g., Zech 1:9-10; 4:12-14; 5:10-11). Without exaggeration, this is the stereotypical mediating other-worldly being of apocalyptic literature.

### *The Purpose of Zechariah's Revelation*

Apocalyptic literature is marked by two purposes. First, it is meant to reinterpret present circumstances in light of a transcendent reality. Second, it is meant to effect changes in belief and behavior by virtue of divine authority. Zechariah's visions display both purposes, but not in each vision. Recall that the visions are presented as a unified group, given on night and probably mediated by the same angel. While each vision contributes its own unique message, they function as a whole.

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<sup>41</sup> Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, eds. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol 1 (Boston, Brill: 2001), 13. See אֲדֹנָי, meaning A.

As with Ezekiel, Zechariah's visions juxtapose the reality of God's people in exile and fighting to rebuild Jerusalem with future glory. Thus, in his first vision, Zechariah is told to cry out, "My cities shall again overflow with prosperity, and the LORD will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem" (Zech 1:17). In 519 BC, when Zechariah received his night visions (cf. Zech 1:7), Israel was in the midst of the beginning of the rebuilding process in Jerusalem. Zechariah was still in Babylon/Persia, but the rebuilding process had already begun. The reality on the ground was half-destroyed homes, no temple, and no walls, but the transcendent reality in the vision is of cities overflowing with prosperity. In the same vein, Zechariah's third vision is of a man measuring Jerusalem. Zechariah is instructed to tell him, "Jerusalem shall be inhabited as villages without walls, because of the multitude of people and livestock in it. And I will be to her a wall of fire all around, declares the LORD, and I will be the glory in her midst" (Zech 2:4-5). Thus a half-built Jerusalem must be reinterpreted in light of the glorious future of Jerusalem. Zechariah's vision of the lamp stand and olive trees is specifically designed to give hope for the completion of the temple rebuilding project that began under Haggai's ministry five months prior. In Zechariah 4:6-7 he says, "This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts. Who are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain." Literally the half built temple must be reinterpreted in light of the transcendent reality of God's empowering Spirit at work in Zerubbabel.

Zechariah's visions also exhibit the second purpose of apocalyptic literature. By virtue of God's authority and the messages contained in the visions, he calls his audience to believe and act differently. For example, in the third vision the Lord reveals the future glory of Jerusalem in the symbolic act of a man measuring the city. Zechariah then says to Israel, "Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion, for behold, I come and I will dwell in your midst, declares the LORD" (Zech 2:10). In light of God's word regarding Jerusalem's future, Israel should sing and rejoice rather than mourn. Also, in Zechariah's fourth vision he sees Joshua given holy clothing before the Lord, symbolizing the removal of his sin. In the vision an angel speaks directly to Joshua, who was in exile with Zechariah at the time of the vision. Zechariah writes in 3:6-7, "And the angel of the LORD solemnly assured Joshua, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts: If you will walk in my ways and keep my charge, then you shall rule my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you the right of access among those who are standing here.'"

God's authoritative word to Joshua is that he would indeed be installed as high priest over the people. This promise is linked to the command for him to walk in God's ways. This an explicit command for Joshua to change his actions in light of God's authority. This message should not be limited to Joshua, as Israel would have understood it as a general call to live in faithful obedience.

Zechariah's eight night visions exhibit seven features characteristic of apocalyptic literature. His work is not exclusively apocalyptic, but the apocalyptic visions serve to

meet the needs of the people of Israel in exile and the general audience of his prophetic work.

## Apocalypse in Revelation

### *The Content of John's Revelation*

The content of the NT book of Revelation is decidedly apocalyptic. It reveals the transcendent reality of eschatological salvation and heaven. In so doing, Revelation stands apart in the NT as intentionally apocalyptic. This is seen by virtue of its title and the frequent quotations of and allusions to the OT.

The book of Revelation is the only apocalyptic work in the New Testament. While certain prophetic messages of Jesus and Paul deal with eschatological issues, only Revelation exhibits the characteristics of apocalyptic literature, and thus only Revelation is formally apocalyptic. Revelation also has the unique distinction of being the only work called an “apocalypse.” In Revelation 1:1 John calls his work *Ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ*, “the apocalypse (or revelation) of Jesus Christ.” According to BDAG, the noun *ἀποκάλυψις* means “making fully known.”<sup>42</sup> The genitive phrase *Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ* is understood either as a genitive of source, as in “the revelation which came from Jesus Christ,” or as an objective genitive, as in “the revelation about Jesus Christ.” The former is preferable because in Revelation 1:1 John goes on to say that Jesus “made it known” (*ἐσήμανεν*, aorist active indicate of ) by

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<sup>42</sup> William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 112.

sending an angel to John. Jesus is the explicit object of the verb “made it known,” and thus is the source of the revelation. That said, the book of Revelation is obviously also a revelation about Jesus Christ. Thus, the title ἀποκάλυψις is not used here as formal genre marker, but rather to simply indicate what follows is indeed a revelation of previously unknown information.

John certainly intended for Revelation to be understood as an apocalyptic text. He makes frequent use of images and language from the already identified OT apocalyptic texts. Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah are quoted and alluded to consistently throughout Revelation. Revelation is intentionally apocalyptic by virtue of the Spirit giving visions consistent with those in the OT, and by virtue of John’s utilization of language from OT apocalyptic texts.

Revelation contains visions of heaven in chapters four and five. John helps his reader by making this explicit in Revelation 4:1, “After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven!” He witnesses the glory of God and the worship of a group of elders and living creatures. His vision of God’s glory in Revelation 4:2-3 echoes Ezekiel 1:26-28. As the vision progresses, John witnesses the outpouring of God’s judgment on the earth by the opening of seals, the blowing of trumpets, and the pouring out of bowls.

Heaven and earth are constantly colliding in John’s visions. In Revelation 8 John witnesses silence in heaven for one hour (Rev 8:1). He then sees an angel take a censer filled with fire from an altar in heaven and throw it down to the earth. John sees war in heaven between Satan and Michael in Revelation 12:7-8. After being defeated Satan



“was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him” (Rev 12:9).

In Revelation 14:14-16 an angel who was sitting on a cloud is called to reap the earth.

In Revelation 15:1 John says, “Then I saw another sign in heaven...” Again, in

Revelation 15:5, “After this I looked, and the sanctuary of the tent of witnesses in

heaven was opened...” Describing the fall of Babylon John says, “After this I saw

another angel coming down from heaven...” (Rev 18:1). He regularly hears voices

calling out from heaven (e.g., Rev 10:4, 11:15, 19:1).

In Revelation 4-20 John constantly has one foot in heaven and the other on earth,

until finally in chapters 21 and 22 heaven comes to earth. Remarkably, John says in

Revelation 21:1, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the

first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.” Furthermore, he sees the new

Jerusalem “coming down out of heaven from God” (Rev 21:2). The rest of chapters 21

and 22 describe heaven on the new earth. This is emphasized by the establishment of

God’s dwelling with man on the new earth. John heard a voice from the throne say,

“Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will

be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God” (Rev 21:3).

The reality of eschatological salvation is prominent in Revelation, although it is

primarily expressed as God’s judgment of sinners who refuse to repent. Revelation

7:1-17 describes the seal of 144,000 believers who will be protected from God’s wrath.

Whether these believers are understood to be representative of the church over all time,

or a specific group of believers on earth during the time of judgment, or even only

Jewish believers, the key point is they are protected from God’s wrath. This is repeated

in Revelation 9:4 where demonic locusts are told “not to harm the grass of the earth or any green plant or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads.” In Revelation 12 the woman, who likely represents the Messianic community, or possibly Israel, is protected from Satan’s wrath. Revelation 19:6-10 describes worship at the victorious marriage supper of the Lamb.

The salvation of God’s people also involves the judgment of God’s enemies.

Revelation 21-22 is the culmination of the salvation of God’s people as God dwells with them in the new Jerusalem. God himself says to John in Revelation 21:6-8,

It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.

The content of the book of Revelation is consistent with expectations for apocalyptic literature. Revelation contains visions of the transcendent reality of heaven and of eschatological salvation. In the dramatic conclusion of the book those transcendent realities are presented as coming to earth.

### *The Form of John's Revelation*

The form of Revelation is consistent with apocalyptic literature in its use of highly symbolic language and a narrative framework. Scholars disagree regarding the extent of symbolic language in Revelation, but all commentators agree that Revelation uses symbolic language.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> See below for a discussion on the different Christian approaches to symbolism in apocalyptic literature.

The best examples of symbolic language in Revelation are in Revelation 12-13. In Revelation 12:1 John says, “And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.” Again in Revelation 12:3 he says, “And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems.” The woman gives birth to a male son who is the Messiah, and thus she is usually taken to represent the Messianic community. In Revelation 12:17 her offspring of those who hold to the testimony of Jesus. The dragon is identified in Revelation 12:9 as “that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world.” John uses the term σημεῖον to describe both the woman and the dragon, which here means an entity or event that points beyond itself to some other entity or reality, thus “they announce the transformation of the world.”<sup>44</sup>

In Revelation 13 the dragon is assisted by two beasts, one that rises out of the sea and one that rises out of the land. These beasts are informed by the beasts of Daniel 7. The first beast stands for either the imperial power of kingdoms as used by Satan or for the individual (or individuals) leading such kingdoms. The second beast stands for either the system of false worship related to the kingdoms or the individual (or individuals) leading such religious movements.

The narrative framework of Revelation is established in Revelation 1:9-10, “I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of

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<sup>44</sup> Otfried Hofius, “σημεῖον,” vol. 2, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 629. Accordance edition.

God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet..."

John first receives the seven messages to the seven churches of Asia Minor, and then he is given a vision of heaven itself, "After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven!" (Rev 4:1). John interacts with his angelic mediators and within the visions. For example, in Revelation 5:4 he weeps because no one is found worthy to open the scroll. One of the elders speaks directly to him in Revelation 5:5, "And one of the elders said to me, 'Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.'" In Revelation 10:8-10 John is told to take the little scroll from an angel and eat it, which he does. In Revelation 19:10 and 22:8 John falls at the feet of an angel to worship him and the angel tells him to get up. John does not just receive words, he experienced and participated in the visions.

### *The Method of John's Revelation*

The book of Revelation also is consistent with the apocalyptic method of delivery through an other worldly mediator. There are three kinds of other worldly mediators in Revelation: John is guided by God himself, by angels, and possibly by the saints in heaven. This fits John's statement in the introduction to the book about the revelation: "He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John."

God the Father and Jesus speak directly to John at several key points in Revelation. At the outset of the book John sees a vision of Jesus himself (Rev 1:12-20).

After hearing a voice speaking to him, John turns to see who is speaking (Rev 1:12). As he looks, he sees a vision of Jesus in his heavenly glory (Rev 1:13-16). John says, “When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, ‘Fear not, I am the first and the last... Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this’” (Rev 1:17, 19). Jesus speaks to him again in Revelation 4:1, “And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.” As Revelation concludes John records the renewal of heaven and earth. In Revelation 21:5-6 he writes, “And he who was seated on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new.’ Also he said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.’ And he said to me, ‘It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.’”

There are two places where Jesus interjects statements without introduction. In Revelation 16:15 he says “Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!” Most translations put this statement in parenthesis. Also, in Revelation 22:7, “And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.” Jesus’ words punctuate the last chapter of Revelation as John concludes the vision. He quotes Jesus in Revelation 22:7, 12, 13, 16, and 20. These words serve as an authentication of the book itself, as Revelation 22:16 illustrates, “I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.”

Jesus used one specific angel, as well as other angels, to give John the visions of Revelation. The first angel John hears is the mighty angel in Revelation 5:2 asking who is able to open the scroll with seven seals. In Revelation 10:4 an angel gives John instruction from heaven, "I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Seal up what the seven thunders have said, and do not write it down." That same voice instructs John to take the little scroll from another angel. John records, "So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll. And he said to me, 'Take and eat it; it will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be sweet as honey' (Rev 10:9). Presumably it is an angel who gives John instruction in Revelation 11:1, "Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told, 'Rise and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there.'" Another angel guides John in Revelation 17:1, "Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters'" (cf. Rev 17:15). In Revelation 19:9 an angel instructs John on what to write, "'Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.' And he said to me, 'These are the true words of God.'" Another angel shows John the church as the Bride of Christ in Revelation 21:9. Significantly, John explains that there was one particular angel who was responsible for giving him the visions of Revelation. He writes in Revelation 22:8, "I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me."

As the visions progress, John may be spoken to by believers in heaven. One of the twenty four elders speaks to John in Revelation 5:5, “And one of the elders said to me, ‘Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.’” Again, in Revelation 7:13-14 one of the elders guides John by explaining who the 144,000 are. Commentators debate the identity of the twenty four elders. Suggestions have included angels, OT saints, angelic representations of all saints, the twelve sons of Joseph and the twelve apostles, and a representative of twenty four prophetic books of the OT.<sup>45</sup> One of the best contextual arguments for understand them as angels is Mounce’s observation that in Revelation 5:9-10 the song of praise they sing refers to redeemed humanity in the third person.<sup>46</sup> Thomas also identifies them as angels, and specifically cites the mediating role they have in Revelation 5:5 and 7:13-14 as a supportive argument.<sup>47</sup> As Beale points out, these elders represent God’s people whether they are angels or not.<sup>48</sup> This idea is supported by 1 Enoch 60:2 where God is “surrounded by the angels and the righteous ones.”

There is no doubt that Revelation fits the apocalyptic genre in the method of delivery by an other worldly being. Jesus himself, angels, and perhaps even saints in heaven help to guide and instruct John throughout his visions.

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<sup>45</sup> For a detailed list of suggestions with reason see G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2013), 323-26.

<sup>46</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997) 121.

<sup>47</sup> Robert Thomas, *Revelation 1-7* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 348.

<sup>48</sup> Beale, 322.

### *The Purpose of John's Revelation*

The book of Revelation exhibits both purposes of apocalyptic literature explicitly. The apocalyptic purpose of reinterpreting circumstances in light of transcendent reality is evident throughout the visions by frequent glimpses into heaven and the ultimate renewal of heaven and earth. The apocalyptic purpose of effecting change in belief and behavior by virtue of divine authority is noted at the beginning and end of the book, as well as in a few key sections.

In Revelation, John seeks to reinterpret the reality of occasional and intensifying persecution of Christians in light of the transcendent reality of Jesus' victory and return. The book of Revelation was written in the context of occasional persecution of Christians in the Roman empire. John wrote during the first century AD from exile on the island of Patmos (Rev 1:9). He does not give the reason for his exile. Carson and Moo summarize the most likely scenario: "Early tradition (e.g., Origen) says that the emperor himself condemned John to exile in Patmos, but it is more likely, considering John's extensive ministry in Asia Minor, that it was a local Roman official from this region who sent John to Patmos in order to get him out of the way."<sup>49</sup>

The specific date assigned to Revelation does not change the likely reason for John's exile. A. Collins states, "The persecution reflected in Revelation... seems to be nothing more than an example of the usual sporadic repression suffered by the Christians in the first two centuries."<sup>50</sup> Thus whether John wrote during Nero's reign in

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<sup>49</sup> D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 707.

<sup>50</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 73.



the 60s AD, or during Domitian's reign in the 90s AD, persecution was a real, though not constant threat to Christians.

John begins the book by highlighting the transcendent reality of Jesus' return in Revelation 1:7, "Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen." Throughout the book John prophesies of intensifying persecution of the church, yet in light of Jesus' return he can write "even so, amen." This is also how John concludes the book. He quotes Jesus' words about his return and affirms them in Revelation 22:20, "He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"

John specifically seeks to reinterpret persecution and martyrdom in light of the transcendent reality of Jesus' victory. In Revelation 7 John sees the innumerable multitude clothed in white robes praising God. One of the twenty four elders answers John and says, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." The idea is that although they died as martyrs, they are still victorious in Christ. This sentiment is repeated in Revelation 12:11 where martyrs are described as having victory over Satan. John writes, "And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death." Thus Christians may very well die, but they are paradoxically victorious because of the transcendent reality of Jesus' victory over Satan. In Revelation 13:10 John offers a poetic riddle that assumes Christians cannot change their fate of persecution and martyrdom, "If anyone

is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if anyone is to be slain with the sword, with the sword must he be slain.”

John offers two reasons why persecution and martyrdom is not defeat and must be reinterpreted as victory. He is shown God’s judgment being poured out on sinners, culminating in God’s final defeat of Satan and sin, and he is shown believers worshipping God after death. Beginning in Revelation 4 and 5, John relates visions of heaven itself. The remainder of the book shifts the focus from heaven to earth and back again. Thus seals are broken in heaven, and God’s wrath is poured out on earth (e.g., Rev 6:12). Angels blow trumpets in heaven and plagues descend on earth (e.g., Rev 8:7). Angels are instructed, “Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God” (Rev 16:1). Babylon is judged with an angel “coming down from heaven” (Rev 18:1). John’s visions are of the transcendent reality of heaven being poured out on earth. This reality puts John’s exile and any persecution his readers were experiencing in the context of God’s greater plan to judge sin.

In Revelation chapter 12, John’s vision offers an explanation for the suffering of the church. Satan, the great dragon, has lost his battle against the Messiah and he has been defeated by Michael (Rev 12:7). He has been cast down on earth, and now rages against the offspring of the woman, “those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus” (Rev 12:17). The suffering of the church is literally the raging of Satan.

Finally, John’s concluding vision relates the transcendent reality of heaven becoming the literal reality on earth. He writes in Revelation 21:1, “Then I saw a new

heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.” He then sees the new Jerusalem “coming down out of heaven from God” (Rev 21:2). God dwells with his people, and heaven is now a reality on the new earth (Rev 21:3-4).

John also makes the second purpose of his visions: to effect change in behavior and action in light of divine authority. He begins the book with this purpose clearly in mind, “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near” (Rev 1:3). It’s not enough just to read or hear the visions, John warns his readers that they need to live in light of it.

John exhorts his readers to endure in light of the prophesied suffering they may experience. In Revelation 13:10 he states, “Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.” He has just seen a vision explaining the reality of suffering for Christians under the first beast, and calls believers to endure in light of such suffering. He repeats that exhortation in Revelation 14:12, “Here is a call for the endurance of the saints,” in light of God’s judgment of those who refuse to repent.

Jesus makes this second purpose clear. In Revelation 16:15 Jesus’ words interrupt the vision of the sixth bowl of God’s wrath. He says, “Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!” He calls believers to be awake and aware in light of the coming judgment of God. In Revelation 21:7 God says, “The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son.” He calls the reader to

conquer or overcome the temptation to worship the beast and compromise his faith. Again in Revelation 22:7 Jesus says, “And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.” Jesus is returning, the reader should live in light of the warnings found in these visions. Jesus also refers to his role as judge of all as a motivator for making behavioral changes, “Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done” (Rev 22:12).

John also uses the glorious future of heaven as a motivator for changing belief and behavior. In Revelation 22:14 he writes, “Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates.” Those who wash their robes are those who have put their faith in Christ, and held to the faith even unto death. The blessing formula is an indirect exhortation. If the reader wants to be blessed, then they should follow the formula of washing their robes. Only then will they be allowed access into the new Jerusalem.

The two apocalyptic purposes of reinterpreting circumstances in light of transcendent reality and changing behavior and belief in light of divine authority are clear in Revelation. In content, form, method of revelation, and purpose, the book of Revelation fits the criteria for apocalyptic literature.

### **A Theology of Preaching Apocalyptic Literature**

Having defined apocalyptic literature and having identified canonical apocalyptic texts, I will now establish a theology of preaching canonical apocalyptic texts. I will

first consider the inspiration of the apocalyptic parts of the canon of Scripture, and then I will consider the canonical status of the apocalyptic portions of the Bible.

### Inspiration of All Scripture

The standard biblical foundation for the proclamation of the canon as the word of God is 2 Timothy 3:16-17, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” Of specific relevance to this project is the phrase “all Scripture” (πᾶσα γραφή). To what Scriptures is Paul referring? Does it include apocalyptic parts of the Old and New Testaments?

Commentators are in general agreement that at a minimum γραφή refers to the writings of the Old Testament. “While γραφή can refer to any ‘writing,’ within the context of the NT and also 2 Timothy it must refer at least to the OT.”<sup>51</sup> The context in 2 Timothy argues in favor of including the works of the Apostles in this group. This is seen primarily by virtue of the plural “sacred writings” (ἱερὰ γράμματα) from 2 Timothy 3:15. The sacred writings made Timothy wise for salvation “through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim 3:15). Certainly the OT pointed forward to the Messiah, but this verbiage also tells us that Paul has in mind those writings that contained the explicit gospel of Jesus Christ. Mounce concludes, “γραφή refers to both the OT and the gospel

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<sup>51</sup> William D. Mounce, *The Pastoral Epistles*, vol. 46, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 2000), 565.

message (for the latter, its oral proclamation and perhaps parts that were written and disseminated by this time are to be included).”<sup>52</sup>

The adjective *πάσα* in the phrase *πάσα γραφή* is important for this study. Here it may refer to any entity within a totality (any), to a totality with emphasis on its parts (every), or simply to a totality as a single unit (all).<sup>53</sup> All three options are grammatically possible. In the first case the translation would be “any Scripture is inspired by God...” Given the occurrence of “sacred writings” in 2 Timothy 3:15, it is clear that Paul has a specific set of writings in mind. In the second case, the translation would be “every Scripture is inspired by God.” In this view the focus would be on individual texts in the group. This may be what Paul has in mind, exhorting Timothy to make use of each part of God’s inspired word. In the third case Paul would be emphasizing the total group, and the translation would be “all Scripture.” The meaning here is not dramatically different than the second option, but in light of the fact that the Apostles were still writing, the second option seems better. Thus *πάσα* serve to identify individual texts, rather than merely referring to the whole collection. In this case the phrase *πάσα γραφή* could be translated “every scripture” as opposed to “all scripture.” Paul’s point is clear either way: every God-inspired text is beneficial for proclamation.

These Scriptures have their source in God, as indicated by the predicate nominative *θεόπνευστος*, “God-breathed.” Henry says, “The apostolic emphasis is

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<sup>52</sup> Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 568.

<sup>53</sup> BDAG, 782-84.

that God ‘breathed out’ what the sacred writers convey in the Biblical writings.”<sup>54</sup> In other words, when the prophets wrote “Thus says the Lord,” they meant it. This includes not only the OT, but also the writings that would become the NT. Paul thanks the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 2:13 that they received the word of God from him, “you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.”

Peter also explains that prophecy is the result of men being inspired by the Spirit of God. In 2 Peter 1:21 he says, “For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” In the previous verse, 2 Peter 1:20, Peter identifies the prophecy as “prophecy of Scripture” (προφητεία γραφής). Specifically at issue was the prophecy of Jesus’ return (2 Pet 1:19). Critics of such a message denied the OT prophets as well as the apostles by claiming neither was of divine origin. According to Bauckham, Peter argues, “No prophecy in the OT Scriptures originated from human initiative or imagination. The Holy Spirit of God inspired not only the prophets’ dreams and visions, but also their interpretations of them, so that when they spoke the prophecies recorded in Scripture they were spokesmen for God himself.”<sup>55</sup> This discussion explicitly deals with OT prophets, including Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah. Peter assumes that the Spirit of

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<sup>54</sup> Carl F. Henry, “The Authority and Inspiration of the Bible,” vol 1, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979), 13.

<sup>55</sup> Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, vol. 50, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 235.

God produced those prophecies, as well as those in the NT, and they are not the result of men's ingenuity.

Therefore, every text of the Scriptures, OT and NT, is beneficial for believers because it comes from God. Each is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16). For this study, the significance of the inspiration of the canon is immediate. If canonical apocalyptic texts are inspired by God, then they also are inerrant in their original autographs.

### Inerrancy of All Scripture

The apocalyptic texts found in the canon are inspired by God and therefore are inerrant. The doctrine of inerrancy means that "the Bible is fully truthful in all of its teachings."<sup>56</sup> Bird states that "Scripture is filled with the story of God *giving* words to people. That is why it is treated as an authoritative and trustworthy message..."<sup>57</sup>

Inerrancy is difficult to measure in regards to predictive prophecy. If a prophecy is yet to be fulfilled, it cannot be evaluated as true or false.<sup>58</sup> In the case of canonical apocalyptic literature, inerrancy has to do with expectation. In the preterist interpretation of canonical apocalyptic literature, especially Revelation, the prophecy has already been fulfilled, and thus can be evaluated as to its accuracy.

The inerrancy of canonical apocalyptic literature is a key issue in interpretation because of the internal claims of these texts to be a special revelation from God. If the

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<sup>56</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 188.

<sup>57</sup> Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), loc. 4243, Kindle.

<sup>58</sup> Erickson, 190.



visions as given are only *potentially* true, or are merely inspirational stories, then they cannot function as intended. Recall that one purpose of apocalyptic literature is to effect change in belief and action by virtue of divine authority. Without divine authority, the call to change belief in light of the visions rings hollow. In short, the recipients of the vision have no reason to believe that the transcendence of heaven and eschatological salvation will become reality.

God inspired the apocalyptic portions of Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah and gave them for the benefit of the church. By the time of the NT there were many apocalyptic works claiming to be the word of God. Yet, the people of God did not recognize them all as being inspired by God. I will demonstrate that Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Revelation are canonical because believers recognized them to be inspired by God.

### Inspiration of Canonical Apocalyptic Literature

My thesis presupposes there is a distinction between canonical and non-canonical apocalyptic works. The former are works that are recognized by the church as inspired by God.<sup>59</sup> The latter are not recognized as inspired by God, and thus do not wield any divine authority. I will show that the people of Israel recognized Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah as inspired by God and therefore included them in the canon of the OT. I will also show that the the western church recognized the book of Revelation as inspired by God and included it in their canon of the NT, and that the eastern church recognized Revelation as inspired by God at a later time. The process of recognizing certain texts

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<sup>59</sup> In my view, contra the Bauer thesis regarding emerging Christianities and the canon, the church does not determine canonicity, but rather recognizes which texts are inspired by God.

as being inspired by God is sometimes called canonization. Canonization is the “recognition of the inherent canonical quality and qualification of each portion as it became available.”<sup>60</sup> Thus over time the people of God discovered which texts in their community were breathed out by God.

### *Canonicity of Daniel*

The book of Daniel was considered part of the Hebrew Bible by Jesus, Josephus, the translators of the Septuagint, and the sect at Qumran. Goldingay states that for each of these sources, “Daniel is a prophet and has similar authority to the prophets within the Hebrew canon, though we do not know when the bounds of this canon were established and thus when Daniel became formally canonical.”<sup>61</sup> The Dead Sea Scrolls contain eight “exemplars” of the book of Daniel.<sup>62</sup> These scrolls date to the first century BC. The inclusion of Daniel in the Septuagint and in the Dead Sea Scrolls demonstrates that Daniel was accepted earlier than the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. The *terminus ad quem* for Daniel’s acceptance as the inspired word of God is then the second century BC.

Daniel is not excluded from any important collection of the Hebrew Bible, but it is included in different places. By the time of the NT the Hebrew Bible was divided into three parts: Torah, Prophets, and Writings. Jesus himself used this three part

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<sup>60</sup> Milton C. Fisher, “The Canon of the Old Testament,” vol 1, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979), 386.

<sup>61</sup> John E. Goldingay, *Daniel*, vol. 30, *Word Biblical Commentary*, (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1989), xxx.

<sup>62</sup> Eugene Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Origin of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 69. Interestingly, none of the DSS versions of Daniel have the Greek expansions.

division in reference to the OT in Luke 24:44. Josephus uses it in *Against Apion* 1:3-43. The earliest work that uses the threefold division of the Hebrew Bible is *Ecclesiasticus*, the apocryphal work dating to 200-180 BC. In the prologue to that work, translated around 132 BC, the author refers to “the law itself, and the prophets, and the rest of the books” (LXX Sir 1:24-25).<sup>63</sup> Regarding these three groupings Ulrich says, “Do we have a canonical list prior to the end of the first century? Yes and no: Torah—yes; Prophets—mostly; Writings—partly.”<sup>64</sup> Daniel is traditionally placed in the third grouping of books in the Hebrew Bible: the Writings (כתשבטם). But in some early sources the book of Daniel was included in the Prophets. This is not surprising, as Daniel is a prophetic work, yet Daniel himself was not a vocational prophet and his work includes the historical narratives of chapters 1-6. Thus in the Septuagint, Daniel is included as “the last of the four books of the so-called Major Prophets.”<sup>65</sup> Josephus includes Daniel in the prophets as well.<sup>66</sup> Jesus refers to Daniel as a prophet in Matthew 24:15.

The earliest lists of the Hebrew Bible confirm that Daniel was recognized as inspired by God at least by the second century BC. The Greek version of Daniel in the Septuagint has many additions: the Prayer of Azariah, the Hymn of the Three Young Men, Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon. These were additions to the original work, as

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<sup>63</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, *The Old Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 34.

<sup>64</sup> Ulrich, 60.

<sup>65</sup> Hill, *Daniel*, 38.

<sup>66</sup> Kaiser, 36. See Josephus, *Against Apion* 1:37-43.

evidenced by the fact that they are not found in the Dead Sea Scrolls editions of Daniel. They were not recognized as inspired by the Jewish community at large, and are not included in Protestant editions of the Bible. They are not apocalyptic literature, and thus do not directly impact this study.

The literature resulting from the council of Jamniah in AD 90 is helpful in discerning the attitude of Jewish religious leaders regarding canonicity. The council of Jamniah (or Jabneh) was a meeting of rabbis “to discuss the reconstruction of Jewish religious life after the collapse of the Jewish commonwealth in AD 70.”<sup>67</sup> They did not determine the canon, but they did discuss whether or not the books in their canon should remain there.

Some at the council of Jamnia thought that only the Hebrew portions of the books of Daniel and Ezra were inspired by God, and that the Aramaic sections were not. The rabbinic literature associated with Jamnia uses the concept of making hands unclean to refer to books that are inspired by God. Their conclusion was that the Aramaic portions of Ezra and Daniel are indeed inspired by God, and thus “The Aramaic [passages] which are in Ezra and Daniel impart uncleanness to hands” (m *Yad* 4:5).<sup>68</sup>

### *Canonicity of Ezekiel*

Ezekiel was recognized as the inspired word of God by the authors of the NT, Josephus, the translators of the Septuagint, and the sect at Qumran. The dates given in

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<sup>67</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1988), 34.

<sup>68</sup> Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah, A New Translation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), Accordance edition.

Ezekiel for the visions run between 597 and 573 BC. The compilation, editing, and final edition were likely completed within a generation of the final vision. Ezekiel is included in the “major prophets” collection of the Septuagint. The Dead Sea Scrolls collection only contains seven Ezekiel scrolls.<sup>69</sup> Those scrolls date from the first century BC to the first century AD.

The book of Ezekiel was also discussed at the council of Jamnia in AD 90. Ezekiel was “charged with lesser or internal contradictions.”<sup>70</sup> The issue was related to the prescriptions for rebuilding and operating the temple, and potential contradictions with the original instructions regarding the temple in the Torah. Famously, “Hannah the son of Hezekiah is blessed for having expended three hundred barrels of ‘midnight oil’ successfully to reconcile them.”<sup>71</sup>

### *Canonicity of Zechariah*

The recognition of Zechariah as inspired by God is tied to the entire collection of minor prophets. The twelve minor prophets were recognized as the inspired word of God by the authors of the NT, Josephus, the translators of the Septuagint, and the sect at Qumran. The twelve are found in seven of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the oldest of which dates to the second century BC. There is some variation in the order in which they appear, but the same twelve books always occur together.

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<sup>69</sup> Ulrich, 27.

<sup>70</sup> Robert C. Newman, “The Council of Jamnia and the Old Testament Canon,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 38, no. 3 (Spring 1976): 339.

<sup>71</sup> Newman, 339.

The recognition that the minor prophets were inspired by God was never seriously challenged in Judaism or ancient Christianity. Most modern commentaries do not include discussions of the acceptance of the minor prophets as divinely inspired. One interesting area of study in this regard is the order of the twelve prophets and textual variants. Studies like Jones' *The Formation of the Book of the Twelve: A Study in Text and Canon* demonstrate that acceptance of the minor prophets was never an issue; questions about the minor prophets regard which versions of each and in what order were accepted.

### *Canonicity of Revelation*

The early church recognized the book of Revelation to be inspired by God, but with significant discussion. Christians in the western remnant of the Roman empire identified Revelation as divinely inspired early on, while Christians in the east were much slower to recognize it. The slow reception of Revelation in the east was specifically due to its contents. Because of this geographical divide, we have far fewer Greek manuscripts of Revelation than any other book, and it circulated independently of other collections of inspired writings.<sup>72</sup>

In the west, the church accepted Revelation very early. Ignatius, Barnabas, and Papias all quote authoritatively from Revelation in the early second century AD. Revelation is found in the Muratorian Canon of the late second century AD, but

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<sup>72</sup> Carson and Moo, 716.

Marcion rejected it, probably due to the frequent OT quotations.<sup>73</sup> Eusebius lists Revelation in both his list of “universally acknowledged” books and in his list of “spurious books,” which nicely summarizes the situation between west and east.<sup>74</sup>

The eastern church had much difficulty finding unity on the issue of the canonicity of Revelation. Cyril of Jerusalem does not include Revelation in his list of books of the NT in the mid fourth century. Athanasius’ list from 367 AD included Revelation, but according to Metzger, “not every one in the Church was ready to follow the option of the bishop of Alexandria.”<sup>75</sup> As Bruce states, “Cyril of Jerusalem and Gregory Nazianzen leave it out of the canon, and while Amphilochius mentions it, he says that the majority reject it.”<sup>76</sup> Metzger notes that John Chrysostom seems to never quote from the book of Revelation.<sup>77</sup> The Synod of Carthage in 397 AD recognized Revelation, while the Synod of Laodicea in 360 AD did not. Significantly, Revelation “has never been included in the official lectionary of the Greek Church, whether Byzantine or modern.”<sup>78</sup>

Much of the suspicion regarding Revelation had to do with the Montanist movement. Montanism was a charismatic version of Christianity founded in the mid

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<sup>73</sup> Carson and Moo, 717.

<sup>74</sup> *Hist. Eccl.* III.XXV.1-7.

<sup>75</sup> Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 212.

<sup>76</sup> Bruce, 213.

<sup>77</sup> Metzger, 214-15.

<sup>78</sup> Metzger, 217.

second century AD by Montanus.<sup>79</sup> It was marked by ecstatic outburst of prophecy and the teaching that in Montanism the new age was beginning. According to Gonzalez, the church could not embrace Montanism because they diminished the importance of the NT in light of their prophetic gift.<sup>80</sup> They prophesied that the New Jerusalem was coming soon, and would arrive “at the little Phrygian town of Pepuzza.”<sup>81</sup> This claim was obviously based on their reading of Revelation 21. Montanism was very popular, and claimed Tertullian as a convert at the outset of the third century AD. The church rejected Montanism, and their bizarre teaching about the end times resulted in “a mistrust of apocalyptic literature, including even the Johannine Apocalypse.”<sup>82</sup>

Eusebius tells us of the anti-Montanist Caius who rejected Revelation because of its violent imagery and millenarianism.<sup>83</sup> Another early church movement, the “Alogi,” rejected Revelation because of its association with Montanism. Carson and Moo point out that the issue with Revelation for the eastern church was the idea, probably influenced by Montanism, that it taught an earthly eschatology.<sup>84</sup>

The majority of Christians accepted Revelation as inspired. The eastern church’s reluctant reception of Revelation was directly tied to an unorthodox interpretation of its significance. Given the need for protecting of sound doctrine, some threw the

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<sup>79</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 76.

<sup>80</sup> Gonzalez, 76.

<sup>81</sup> Metzger, 100.

<sup>82</sup> Metzger, 102.

<sup>83</sup> Metzger, 105; cf. Eusebius *Hist. Eccl.* VI.XX.3.

<sup>84</sup> Carson and Moo, 717.



proverbial baby out with the bathwater. It is not surprising that the apocalyptic elements were a source of hesitation. Perhaps it is surprising that the apocalyptic works of the OT did not generate the same kind of response.

All of the apocalyptic texts in the Bible were accepted as inspired by God by the people of God, although Revelation did face some objections. Based on the testimony of the church, these canonical apocalyptic texts were breathed by God, generated from the Holy Spirit who gave the visions to the men who recorded them. Divine inspiration sets apart canonical apocalyptic literature from non-canonical apocalyptic literature. The latter were either the result of imagination, dreams, drug induced hallucinations, or purposeful mimicking of the genre.

### **Interpreting Apocalyptic Literature**

In order to establish the biblical and theological foundation of applying canonical apocalyptic literature to postmodern culture, I must consider the interpretive challenges of canonical apocalyptic literature. I have thus far defined and identified canonical apocalyptic literature, and proposed a theology of preaching canonical apocalyptic texts. Christians have long agreed that we should preach the apocalyptic portions of the Bible. However, Christians have disagreed in major ways about how to interpret apocalyptic texts. In particular, Christians disagree about three areas of interpretation regarding apocalyptic texts: the relevance of non-canonical apocalyptic texts in interpreting canonical apocalyptic texts, the symbolic nature of language in apocalyptic texts, and the eschatological framework for interpreting apocalyptic texts in the Bible. These

three areas of disagreement are causally related. How an interpreter answers the question of the relevance of non-canonical apocalyptic texts will lead to certain positions regarding symbolic language in apocalyptic parts of the Bible which lead to certain eschatological grids for understanding these works.

### Relevance of Non-canonical Apocalyptic Works

The first major area of disagreement in Christian interpretation of canonical apocalyptic texts is in the relevance of non-canonical apocalyptic texts as a source of interpretive help. Some scholars are reluctant to appropriate non-canonical apocalyptic works because they believe to appropriate such works is inconsistent with the doctrine of inspiration. Also, they are reluctant to acknowledge the symbolic language of apocalyptic literature.

Many scholars who make use of non-canonical apocalyptic texts in interpreting apocalyptic texts assume that the biblical authors crafted the literature work as a conscious effort, rather than receiving the vision spontaneously from the Spirit. Therefore, some scholars connect making use of non-canonical apocalyptic texts with denying the doctrine of inspiration. Thomas' view on the genre of the book of Revelation is an illustration of reluctance to appropriate non-canonical apocalyptic texts as an interpretive aid. He concludes that labeling the book of Revelation as apocalyptic literature means that Spirit did not inspire John as he wrote: "The literal interpretation of Revelation is the one generally associated with the premillennial return of Christ and a view of inspiration that understands God to be the real author of every book of the

Bible.”<sup>85</sup> Again, Thomas writes, “It may be concluded, therefore, that the literary genre of inspired writings was not the choice of the human author, but was an inevitable result of the manner in which God chose to reveal his message to the prophet. This, of course, distinguishes them from uninspired but similar works whose writers did, in fact, choose a particular genre.”<sup>86</sup>

Some who label Revelation apocalyptic literature deny the doctrine of inspiration and therefore emphasize John’s deliberate choices in wording as being consistent with OT apocalyptic texts and apocalyptic works in general. But many recognize Revelation as apocalyptic literature and also maintain that it was inspired by the Holy Spirit. Mounce, an interpreter who embraces the idea of inspiration and believes that Revelation is apocalyptic literature, states, “the descriptions themselves are not John’s creative attempt to portray eschatological truth in apocalyptic terminology but the faithful transmission of what he actually saw in authentic vision.”<sup>87</sup>

### The Visionary Nature of Apocalyptic Texts

Scholars also disagree about the degree to which language in canonical apocalyptic literature is symbolic. Interpreters agree that Daniel, Zechariah, Ezekiel, and Revelation contain symbolic language. The question is to what degree. Dispensational interpreters have been extremely hesitant to allow for symbolism in

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<sup>85</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 32.

<sup>86</sup> Thomas, “Literary Genre,” 87.

<sup>87</sup> Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 30.

canonical apocalyptic texts. Thomas states that the futurist approach to Revelation which views it as prophecy and not primarily as apocalyptic is “the view that best accords with the principle of literal interpretation.”<sup>88</sup> The interpretive foundation of Thomas’ method is to interpret prophecy literally unless such an understanding is impossible or illogical. His hermeneutic is predisposed to allow for symbolism only if it is explicit or absolutely demanded. Walvoord articulates the same approach: “where expressions are not explained, they can normally be interpreted according to their natural meaning, unless the context clearly indicates otherwise.”<sup>89</sup>

Other interpreters, however, understand figurative and symbolic language to be a key feature of apocalyptic literature. Therefore, symbols need not be explicitly identified as such in the text. By identifying parts of prophetic works as apocalyptic, interpreters acknowledge that readers will need a new set of expectations. Ramm affirms that there are special hermeneutics for certain parts of Scripture, and he lists examples “parables, prophecy, apocalypse, and poetry.”<sup>90</sup> Mounce, one commentator who does label Revelation as apocalyptic literature, states that “Symbolism plays a major role in apocalyptic.”<sup>91</sup>

Some dispensational scholars agree, at least in principle. Johnson states that interpreting the symbols of apocalyptic visions requires examining various contexts including “other writings in the apocalyptic literary genre that may provide a resource

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<sup>88</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 32.

<sup>89</sup> John Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1966), 30.

<sup>90</sup> Walvoord, 11.

<sup>91</sup> Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 4.

for recognized symbolism.”<sup>92</sup> Alexander, in the introduction to his commentary on Ezekiel, cites Mesopotamian dream-visions as apocalyptic literature that provides interpretive help in dealing with Ezekiel. He states, “Ezekiel used this common type of literature in his book and also developed (along with Daniel and Zechariah in the OT) apocalyptic literature in the dream-vision format.”<sup>93</sup>

The symbolism in canonical apocalyptic literature need not be explicitly labeled a sign or symbol in the text. Apocalyptic visions, consistent with the genre, are highly figurative and symbolic. These visions should not be interpreted as security camera footage of the future, but rather as symbols that point to historical realities either past, present, or future. Context must be the determining factor as to what elements of each vision should be taken literally versus figuratively.

### Eschatological Interpretive Grids

Christians usually take one of four interpretive approaches to canonical apocalyptic literature: futurist, preterist, historical, or idealist. Erickson notes that this fourfold classification “is most often used as a means of classifying interpretations of the book of Revelation, or, more generally, all such prophetic literature, the system can also be applied to distinguish views of eschatology.”<sup>94</sup> Significant interpretive differences tend to focus on views of the millennium in Revelation 20:1-6. Finally, the

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<sup>92</sup> Johnson, 167.

<sup>93</sup> Alexander, 745.

<sup>94</sup> Erickson, 1060.

general interpretive differences between covenant theology and dispensational theology are primarily related to interpreting canonical apocalyptic literature.

The four main interpretive approaches to canonical apocalyptic literature result in different understandings of how and when the prophetic aspect of such texts are fulfilled. In the futurist model, the majority of the revelation in the visions of apocalyptic literature will come to pass at the end of the age.<sup>95</sup> This is not to say that every vision must portray the future, but in general the majority of the visions focus on ultimate end of the age and as such have not yet happened. For example, in Daniel 9:26-27 the mediating angel tells Daniel about last week of years in the seventy weeks of years. Some futurist interpreters believe that weeks one through sixty nine occurred roughly from the time of the Babylonians until the Greek empire or from the Persians until the Roman empire, but the seventieth week refers to a distant seven year time of tribulation that will occur just before Jesus' second coming. Wood argues that this is the case because the seventieth week "is treated separately from the first sixty-nine" and because it deals specifically "with Christ's second coming."<sup>96</sup>

In the preterist approach the events portrayed in the apocalyptic visions are symbolic representations of current events from the time of the author. Therefore, for any subsequent generation, these events already occurred. Again, taking the example of Daniel 9:26-27, Collins identifies the one who makes the covenant in Daniel 9:27 as

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<sup>95</sup> Erickson, 1059.

<sup>96</sup> Wood, *Daniel*, 260.

Antichus IV Epiphanes, “The protagonist in the last week is Antiochus Epiphanes...”<sup>97</sup>

Thus the seventieth week is the era of Antiochus’ reign. The two witnesses of Revelation 11:1-13 provide another example of the preterist interpretive approach. Preterist interpreters tend to understand these two witnesses as representing Christians who were alive in Jerusalem from 67-70 AD, Jewish governing and religious authorities during the first Jewish revolt, or Jewish prophets during the entire era of the OT up until 70 AD.<sup>98</sup>

The preterist approach does not take the prophetic aspect of canonical apocalyptic literature seriously enough, especially with the book of Revelation. As Mounce states, “The major problem with the preterist position is that the decisive victory portrayed in the latter chapters of the Apocalypse was never achieved.”<sup>99</sup> Thomas notes that the exclusively preterist approach to Jesus’ second coming in Revelation being fulfilled in the destruction of the temple in 70 AD “does injustice to the prophetic nature of the work.”<sup>100</sup> However, Thomas rightly notes that the historical setting is crucial in interpreting the book, thus the observations of a preterist interpreter are not entirely invalid.

The historical interpretive approach to canonical apocalyptic literature holds that the events portrayed in the apocalyptic visions of Revelation were future from the

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<sup>97</sup> Collins, *Daniel*, loc. 1637, Kindle. Note that for Collins, Daniel is written after the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes.

<sup>98</sup> Christine Joy Tan, “Preterists and the Two Witnesses in Revelation 11,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 171, no. 681 (Jan.-Mar. 2014): 73.

<sup>99</sup> Mounce, *Revelation*, 27.

<sup>100</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 30.

perspective of the writer, but have been/are being fulfilled in the history of the church.

In the case of the two witnesses in Revelation 11:1-13, historicist interpreters have understood them to represent “the lines of witnesses for Christ during the 1,260 years of papal domination before the Reformation.”<sup>101</sup> Another example, Elliott proposes that Mohammed is the falling star during the fifth trumpet (Rev 9:1).<sup>102</sup>

The historicist approach is too subjective in general and too limited in its understanding of the prophetic nature of canonical apocalyptic literature. This approach is so subjective that its proponents do not agree on details (e.g., who is the beast- Pope Leo X? Mussolini? Hitler?), and it provides no method of validating such conclusions. While the arguments presented for any given view may be plausible to the author, in the end they are too subjective and are impossible to verify. The historicist view is also too limited. It has traditionally held that the visions of Revelation detail the history of Christianity in Western Europe. What about the rest of the Christian world?

The idealist approach to canonical apocalyptic literature removes the time element entirely from the discussion. In this view the book of Revelation is an allegory for the Christian life which provides “...an exhibition of the principles which govern the history both of the word and the Church.”<sup>103</sup> The visions are simply abstract expressions of timeless truths.<sup>104</sup> They do not have reference to referents in history past

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<sup>101</sup> Christine Joy Tan, “A Critique of Idealist and Historicist Views of the Two Witnesses in Revelation 11,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 171, no. 683 (Jul.-Sept. 2014): 339.

<sup>102</sup> E. B. Elliott, *Horae Apocalypticæ*, vol. 2 (London: Seeleys, 1851), 417-18. See Thomas, *Revelation* 1-7, 30-31.

<sup>103</sup> William Milligan, *The Book of Revelation* (New York: George H. Doran, 1889), 154-55.

<sup>104</sup> Erickson, 1060.



or future. In the example of the two witnesses in Revelation 11:1-13, Hendriksen says, “These witnesses symbolize the Church militant bearing testimony through its ministers and missionaries throughout the present dispensation.”<sup>105</sup>

The major flaw of the idealist approach is that it does not account for the reality of prophecy and prophetic fulfillment. Given a biblical understanding of inspiration, the idea of prophecy is not only plausible, but necessary. To relegate prophecy to the realm of myth is inconsistent with the concept of God being active with creation. If God is sovereign, he can prophesy. The idealist approach simply makes too little of the prophetic nature of apocalyptic literature. Rather than simply being a generic expression of good versus evil, the prophets who recorded their visions understood them to be representative of real events.

I believe the futurist interpretive approach to canonical apocalyptic literature is the strongest for three reasons. First, it allows for the possibility of future prophetic fulfillment. Jesus himself assumed the reality of future telling prophecy. Jesus quoted from Old Testament prophets with the expectation of future fulfillment. In Matthew 24:14-15 Jesus said, “So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.” Jesus understood Daniel’s prophecy in Daniel 8:13 and 9:27 to be future. He may be referring to the destruction of the temple in AD 70, or to a yet future event, but either way he affirms the existence of future prophecy in

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<sup>105</sup> William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1967), 129.

Daniel. As a second example, Jesus' claim in Luke 4:17-21 that he was the fulfillment of Isaiah 61:1-2a demonstrates his clear affirmation of future telling prophecy in Isaiah.

Second, the futurist approach to canonical apocalyptic literature is consistent with other NT writers who quote or allude to prophetic texts in ways that presuppose a future fulfillment. For example, Matthew interprets Jesus' move from Nazareth to Capernaum as fulfilling Isaiah 9:1-2. He literally says Jesus made the move "so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled..." (Matt 4:14).<sup>106</sup> If OT prophecy functioned this way, it follows that prophecy in the NT would as well. John explicitly calls Revelation a prophecy both at the beginning and at the end (Rev 1:3, 22:7, 10, 18, 19). For John to label it prophecy means something specific, and his understanding of prophecy must be informed by the context of the NT.

Third, the futurist approach to the book of Revelation provides the best account for the original context and message of the book. The future fulfillment of the visions of Revelation is central to the motivational and hope-giving message of John to his first century readers. Taken as a whole, Revelation teaches that Christians who suffer, and even die, will be victorious with the Lamb in the future, therefore they should continue to live faithful lives in the present. The preterist approach is a helpful correction to the allegorical approaches of the historical and idealist approach, but it misses the main point: Jesus' victory will really happen. As Carson and Moo state, "... it is the futurist

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<sup>106</sup> Cf. Matthew 8:17, 12:17, 13:14, etc. Regardless of exactly how Matthew understands these prophecies to be fulfilled, there is no question that he expected them to be fulfilled as real, future telling prophecy.

approach that comes closest to doing justice to the nature and purposes of Revelation... Revelation is about eschatology, not history.”<sup>107</sup>

While the futurist approach has the most merit, it cannot be applied uncritically. Certain visions clearly do not refer to future events at the end of the age. For example, Daniel 11:2-45 certainly refers to the kings of the Seleucid and Ptolemaic kingdoms. Depending on which date an interpreter assumes for Daniel, this is either *ex-eventu* prophecy (pseudo-prophecy written after the event occurred), or prophecy of the near future (roughly three hundred years). Either way, Daniel 11:2-45 does not depict end time events. Likewise, Zechariah 6:8 is a vision of horses patrolling “the north country” (i.e., Babylon). God’s Spirit is at rest because the black horses had already gone north and executed judgement on Babylon. Thus, as Chisholm notes, this vision is retrospective.<sup>108</sup>

Scholars often highlight the differences between the four broad approaches to canonical apocalyptic literature by referring to their interpretation of the millennial kingdom of Jesus described in Revelation 20:1-6. These differences are labeled by their view of the coming of Christ in relation to the millennium and to the nature of the millennial kingdom.

Premillennialism is the view that Christ will return before establishing a literal kingdom on earth. This was the view of the earliest church, and is sometimes referred to as chiliasm (in reference to the Greek word for one thousand, *χίλιοι*). For

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<sup>107</sup> Carson and Moo, 720.

<sup>108</sup> Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 484.

example, in the mid second century AD, Commodianus writes about how at the end of the age, "...the Medes and Parthians burn for a thousand years, as the hidden words of John declare. For then after a thousand years they are delivered over to Gehenna; and he whose work they were, with them are burnt up."<sup>109</sup>

Amillennialism is the view that the millennium of Revelation 20:1-6 is symbolic of the church age, and not of a literal geopolitical kingdom. Storms clarifies that the term amillennialism is somewhat of a misnomer due to the alpha privative; he says, "I most assuredly do believe in the reality of a literal millennial kingdom."<sup>110</sup> He goes on to define amillennialism as the belief that "the present age of the Church between the first and second comings of Christ in its entirety *is* the millennium."<sup>111</sup>

Postmillennialism is the view that the church is actually building the kingdom of God by the preaching of the gospel, and thus has the determining role as to when Christ will return. When the church has done her job and preached the gospel to all the nations, the millennium will have been established, and Christ will return. Hence the moniker postmillennialism. Gentry states, "the core, distinctive, defining belief within postmillennialism is that Christ will return to the earth *after* the Spirit-blessed Gospel has had *overwhelming success* in bringing the majority of the world to Christ."<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds. *Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*, vol. 4, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1885), Accordance ed.

<sup>110</sup> Sam Storms, *Kingdom Come: The Amillennial Alternative* (Fearn, Ross-Shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2013), loc. 7211, Kindle.

<sup>111</sup> Storms, loc. 7232, Kindle.

<sup>112</sup> Kenneth Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), 90.

### *Ex-eventu* Prophecy

The legitimacy of future telling prophecy is the major divide for interpreting for canonical apocalyptic literature. Many scholars do not affirm the possibility of future telling prophecy. Some reject the reality of future telling prophecy because of a lack of belief in supernatural events, others because of the relation of prophecy to the tension between God's sovereignty and human will.

Many who reject future telling prophecy ground this view on the assumption that future telling prophecy is prophecy *ex-eventu*. *Ex-eventu* means "after the event." Some non-canonical prophetic works used this literary device as a way of legitimizing the content of the prophecy. Sparks calls *ex-eventu* prophecies "pseudoprophecies [sic] because their 'predictions' were made after the events had occurred."<sup>113</sup> The purpose of *ex-eventu* prophecy was "to establish the text's credibility" and "to follow this with either a prediction or an attempt to legitimize an institution."<sup>114</sup> For example, in the Mesopotamian proto-apocalyptic Sulgi Prophetic Speech, dated to the twelfth century BC, "the king 'predicts' the history of Babylon down to the twelfth century" BC.<sup>115</sup> In this case the *ex-eventu* prophecy apparently serves to legitimize the reign of Nebuchadnezzar I.

Scholars who reject the possibility of genuine future telling prophecy have accurately observed the phenomenon of *ex-eventu* prophecy in non-canonical

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<sup>113</sup> Sparks, 241.

<sup>114</sup> Sparks, 241.

<sup>115</sup> Sparks, 242.

apocalyptic literature, and thus conclude that the canonical apocalyptic texts operate in the same way. Collins states, “Ex eventu prophecy is an old phenomenon in the Bible; an early example can be found in Genesis 15:13-16.”<sup>116</sup> He goes on to cite Daniel 7, 8:23-27, 9, 11 as examples.<sup>117</sup> The rejection of genuine prophecy is one motivation for dating the apocalyptic sections of Daniel to the second century BC. Hill describes how the view that Daniel 7-12 was actually composed during the exile in the sixth century BC was given up due to an anti-supernatural worldview: “The traditional view of Daniel was further eroded by the Enlightenment’s anti supernaturalist assumptions of biblical scholarship rooted in the elevation of reason over revelation—thus dismissing a priori such categories as “miracle” and “predictive prophecy” in the biblical record.”<sup>118</sup>

Scholars who allow for the existence of future telling prophecy recognize that the authenticity of the prophetic work is at stake. Thomas states, “Possession of a direct revelation from God was one thing that distinguished true prophecy from false prophecy.”<sup>119</sup> The legitimacy of prophecy is a foundational element of the doctrine of the Scriptures, and one reason why it is important to maintain a distinction between canonical and non-canonical apocalyptic literature.

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<sup>116</sup> Collins, *Daniel*, loc. 245, Kindle.

<sup>117</sup> Collins, *Daniel*, loc. 245-64, Kindle.

<sup>118</sup> Hill, *Daniel*, 24.

<sup>119</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 26.

## A Biblical Theology of God's Sovereignty in Apocalyptic Literature

### Open Theism

Other theological viewpoints impact the interpretation of canonical apocalyptic literature in addition to the anti-supernatural bias against prophecy. Many struggle not with the plausibility of prophecy, but with how prophecy impacts the tension between the sovereignty of God and human will. The rejection of the sovereignty of God creates major problems for interpreting prophecy. Open theists, process theologians, and liberation theologians are three examples of interpreters that reject the genuine prophetic element in canonical apocalyptic literature.

Open theists believe that God knows everything in reality, but that he cannot know the future as it does not exist in reality yet. Gregory Boyd states this view clearly, “So God can’t foreknow the good or bad decisions of the people He creates until He creates these people and they, in turn, create their decisions.”<sup>120</sup> This boils down to a problem with the existence of evil and determinism.<sup>121</sup> Hasker, an open theist, asks the question regarding prophecy, “if God does not *know* what the future will be like, how can he *tell* us what it will be like?”<sup>122</sup>

According to Wellum, open theists have three solutions for the problem of predictive prophecy. First, open theists recognize that much Biblical prophecy is conditional prophecy (e.g., Jonah’s message to Ninevah). Second, they reinterpret

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<sup>120</sup> Gregory A. Boyd and Edward K. Boyd, *Letters from a Skeptic* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1994), 30.

<sup>121</sup> The two general viewpoints on determinism in Christian theology are indeterminism and compatibilism (soft determinism).

<sup>122</sup> William Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 194.

much of Biblical prophecy as excellent forecasting (e.g., Pharoah's hard heart). This means that God very accurately predicts the future based on pattern recognition and his superior knowledge of reality. Third, open theists credit fulfilled prophecy to God's determination. They conclude that "many prophecies include things that are foreknown because it is God's purpose or intention to bring them about irrespective of human decision."<sup>123</sup>

The three solutions of open theism to the problem of predictive prophecy do not sufficiently account for the testimony of Scripture. First, no one argues that there is much conditional prophecy in the Bible, but not all prophecy is conditional. Second, Wellum rightly points out that the forecasting approach to predictive prophecy is not plausible because there is no guarantee a forecast will be right, which is in direct conflict with a belief that the canonical Scriptures are inerrant.<sup>124</sup> If God could feasibly be wrong in a predictive prophecy, then the Scriptures are not inerrant, just excellent. The difference is crucial. It would certainly be amazing for God to rightly predict every prophecy and "that the biblical authors just happened to write everything that God wanted them to write."<sup>125</sup> But an amazing track record in the past doesn't guarantee future predictions will come to pass. Third, unconditional (or unilateral) prophecies in the Scriptures are specifically designed to prove God's sovereignty, not as an alternative to it. This is the argument we find in Isaiah 41:21-23 against idols, "Let them bring

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<sup>123</sup> Stephen J. Wellum, "The Inerrancy of Scripture," *Beyond the Bounds*, edited by John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 268-69.

<sup>124</sup> Wellum, 270.

<sup>125</sup> Wellum, 271.



them, and tell us what is to happen. Tell us the former things, what they are, that we may consider them, that we may know their outcome; or declare to us the things to come. Tell us what is to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods; do good, or do harm, that we may be dismayed and terrified.” Idols cannot accurately prophesy of the future because they are not truly divine. As Isaiah continues, God offers predictive prophecy as certification of his identity as God, “Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them.” (Isa. 42:9).

Thus open theists view of predictive prophecy is inconsistent with a futurist interpretation of canonical apocalyptic literature which is founded on the inspiration and inerrancy of the canon of Scripture.

### Process Theologies

Process theologians believe that reality, including God, is dynamic rather than static. The principle of process is that being is constituted by becoming.<sup>126</sup> As such, the universe is decidedly not determined by the sovereign Creator, rather God interacts with creation and is part of it. Furthermore, when it comes to God’s omniscience, process theologians hold that “God’s knowledge of the future is limited to possibilities.”<sup>127</sup> For process theologians the truthfulness of propositions in Scripture is not as crucial as the experience of the statements. Whitehead describes the purpose of propositions as “lures

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<sup>126</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: MacMillian Co., 1929), 31.

<sup>127</sup> F. Duane Lindsey, “An Evangelical Overview of Process Theology,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 134, no. 533 (Jan.-Mar. 1977): 22.

for feeling.”<sup>128</sup> Thus, as Young summarizes, “the ‘truth’ of a text— whether it is an accurate symbolization of the sense-data provided by certain events in the past—does not constitute a text's chief significance.”<sup>129</sup> Predictive prophecy is concerned with future events, but to think in such terms is already inconsistent with process theology.

In this line of thinking, many process theologians entirely abandon the question of predictive prophecy with regard to canonical apocalyptic literature. Instead, process theologians focus on how these visions, articulated in the past, relate to and interact with present realities. In process theology, prophecy is not inspired in the sense that it is the static expression of a message from God. Rather, “From the standpoint of God's creative-redemptive aims, the text becomes a suggestion for a way to view some particular aspect of the past, the future, or even reality as a whole.”<sup>130</sup>

The process theologian's approach to canonical apocalyptic literature does not adequately account for the truth claims assumed in canonical apocalyptic texts. If Ezekiel's vision of the future temple is a dynamic image meant to inspire readers devoid of guarantee that what it symbolizes will become reality, then the vision is robbed of its legitimacy and therefore function. Put another way, if the apocalyptic vision is only a fairy tale told to make people feel better, it cannot shoulder the claim that it is a message from God. Part of the function of the other-worldly mediator is to verify that the vision

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<sup>128</sup> Whitehead, 25.

<sup>129</sup> R. Garland Young, “The Role of the Spirit in Texts : James Sanders, Paul Achtemeier, and Process Theology,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 13, no. 3 (Fall 1986): 235.

<sup>130</sup> Young, 236-37.

is indeed a genuine message from God. The content of the vision “does not fall within the compass of human knowledge.”<sup>131</sup>

### Liberation Theology

Liberation theologians believe traditional interpretive frameworks are insufficient because they do not account for the presuppositions of the interpreter, they result in abstract theological conclusions rather than concrete action in the word for Christ, and they remain too neutral in terms of politics and economic issues that impact culture.<sup>132</sup> The alternative offered in liberation theology is to assume that the cultural context of the interpreter does not impact the application of Scripture, but it actually changes the meaning of the Scripture. Liberation becomes the central hermeneutical key for all of the Scriptures, and sin becomes identified almost exclusively with oppression and slavery. Thus, Jesus’ victory is interpreted in light of a political liberation agenda.

Some liberation theologians directly question the reality of the inspiration of the canon. Assmann said, “The only Bible is the sociological bible [sic] of what I see happening here and now as a Christian.”<sup>133</sup> This approach frees the liberation theologian to apply canonical apocalyptic literature to contemporary culture in virtually any possible way. For example, note the title of Boesak’s work, *Comfort and Protest: The Apocalypse from South African Perspective*. Boesak interprets Revelation in light

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<sup>131</sup> Collins, “Morphology,” 10.

<sup>132</sup> Larry Dean Pettegrew, “Liberation Theology and Hermeneutical Preunderstandings,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148, no. 591 (Spring 1991): 277-78.

<sup>133</sup> Hugo Assmann, *Theology for a Nomad Church*, translated by Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976), 61.

of South Africa's fight for independence from Holland in the eighteenth century.<sup>134</sup> In another example, Richard applies Revelation to impoverished communities in Latin America in *Apocalypse: A People's Commentary on the Book of Revelation*.<sup>135</sup> In another example, Roffey applies liberation theology to Revelation 13:16-17. He says, "Liberation theology claims that those who are oppressed are in the best position to interpret a gospel preached to the oppressed."<sup>136</sup> He goes on to equate the first Beast with the Pentagon and the idol with the atomic bomb.<sup>137</sup>

Liberation theology is inadequate for interpreting canonical apocalyptic literature because it imposes a cultural interpretive agenda on the text rather than applying the message of the text. Carson makes the point clearly, "To appeal to the demands of the interpreter's cultural context is legitimate, provided the intent is to facilitate the understanding and proclamation of the Bible within that context, not to transfer the authority of the Bible to conceptions and mandates not demonstrably emerging from the horizon of understanding of the biblical writers themselves."<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Allen Boesak, *Comfort and Protest* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1987).

<sup>135</sup> Pablo Richard, *Apocalypse: A People's Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009).

<sup>136</sup> John W. Roffey, "On Doing Reflection Theology: Poverty and Revelation 13:16-17," *Colloquium* 14, no 2 (May 1982): 54.

<sup>137</sup> Roffey, 56-57.

<sup>138</sup> D. A. Carson, *Biblical Interpretation and the Church* (New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984), 16-17.

Part of the purpose of apocalyptic literature is to reinterpret circumstances in light of the transcendent reality, but the reinterpretation must be informed by the content of the visions, not imposed upon them.

## **Conclusion**

In chapter two I reviewed the key biblical and theological themes related to the apocalyptic literature of the Bible. I established a theology of preaching apocalyptic texts as they are inspired by God and profitable for the equipping of Christians. I examined the nature of apocalyptic works and key differences in interpretive approaches. I reviewed various approaches to non-canonical apocalyptic literature, noting key differences in their relevance to interpreting canonical apocalyptic texts. Finally, I reviewed the theological basis of the sovereignty of God which is presupposed in prophetic literature and central to the idea of future telling in prophetic visions.

In chapter three I will review the key literature in the area of applying canonical apocalyptic texts to post modern culture. This literature is limited to a handful of books in the field of homiletics, journal articles, and relevant sections of works in the field of hermeneutics.

Apocalyptic texts come to us not because we are their first addressees (we're not), but because apocalyptic texts do something to the way we view the world.

—David Jacobsen, *Preaching in the New Creation*

## CHAPTER THREE

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Introduction**

The majority of the literature that crosses the intersection of apocalyptic literature and postmodern culture is homiletic literature. In these works, authors first argue *the reason* preachers should make use of canonical apocalyptic literature. This makes sense, as it is widely acknowledged that preachers avoid apocalyptic texts like the plagues contained within them. Second, they logically move on to explain *how* preachers may go about preaching canonical apocalyptic literature. Usually they identify interpretive difficulties, and offer suggestions for crafting sermons based on apocalyptic parts of the Bible. This project is not primarily concerned with how to preach apocalyptic literature, but rather with how the message of canonical apocalyptic literature is especially relevant to postmoderns.

Three broad themes stand out in the literature. First, authors acknowledge the disparity between the real life circumstances of the original recipients of canonical apocalyptic literature and that of postmoderns. Second, authors express various ways

that apocalyptic literature is applicable to the postmodern world.<sup>1</sup> Third, these authors tend to come from a non-futurist interpretive approach to canonical apocalyptic literature. This is reflected in some of their comments as to what they feel are illegitimate applications of canonical apocalyptic literature.

### **Different Contexts: The World Has Changed**

In the homiletic literature on preaching canonical apocalyptic texts, authors identify how drastically different the worlds of the original audiences of said texts are from contemporary western culture. Primarily, they note the different levels of persecution and the lack of an apocalyptic view of life. In the end, they conclude that the contemporary person can learn much from canonical apocalyptic literature despite these differences.

Homiletic authors give the most attention to the different levels of persecution for the original audiences of apocalyptic literature when compared to contemporary audiences: contemporary individuals largely live lives of peace, not war. Craddock discusses the “feeling of distance” between John in Revelation and contemporary readers.<sup>2</sup> He states, “How can anyone today in the high noon of tranquility possibly understand the lives of brothers and sisters trapped in the midnight of fear and death?”<sup>3</sup> While there is some important discussion on the extent and severity of persecution for

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<sup>1</sup> In these works, most authors do not explicitly identify their culture as postmodern. However, the “modern audiences” whom they had in mind are postmodern.

<sup>2</sup> Fred B. Craddock, “Preaching the Book of Revelation,” *Interpretation* 40, no. 3 (July 1986): 271.

<sup>3</sup> Craddock, 271.

the original audience of John's Revelation, the general point is still valid. While I don't share Craddock's emphasis on emotion driving a sermon, he rightly identifies the disconnect here.

Jeter summarizes the gap in contexts personally: "I do not live in a community that generally functions under an apocalyptic ideology."<sup>4</sup> By this he means in contrast to those who live in contexts where persecution is extreme and women and children are literally "fleeing from the wrath of brutal monsters."<sup>5</sup> Twenty-first century Christians in most Western cultural contexts do not face imprisonment or martyrdom as plausible consequences of following Jesus Christ.

These authors helpfully conclude that canonical apocalyptic works are relevant today, even given the dramatic differences in contemporary Western (postmodern) culture and the original recipients. Campbell describes how preachers struggle to make a hermeneutical move from seemingly irrelevant material to their congregations, "Often, such preachers wonder what Revelation has to say to their congregations, as the Apocalypse has often been understood as addressed solely to marginalized, persecuted Christians in the first century. The hermeneutical move to privileged, contemporary congregations often seems unmanageable."<sup>6</sup> He goes on to argue that correcting a misunderstanding of Revelation's original recipients' circumstances opens the door to appropriately applying the book to congregations

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph R. Jeter, Jr., "Revelation-based Preaching: Homiletic Approaches," *Preaching through the Apocalypse*, ed. by Cornish R. Rogers and Joseph R. Jeter, Jr. (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1992), 21.

<sup>5</sup> Jeter, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Charles L. Campbell, "Apocalypse Now: Preaching Revelation as Narrative," *Narrative Reading, Narrative Preaching*, ed. by Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 142.



today. He identifies that some of the original recipients had “comfortably and perhaps unconsciously accommodated themselves to the ways of the empire.”<sup>7</sup> This is one way that many contemporary readers of Revelation struggle: accommodating themselves to the way of the world.

Jones and Sumney deal with problem of persecution directly: “Although contemporary Christians in the United States may not face systematic persecution, apocalyptic texts challenge us to name those places where we are out of sync with the world around us because of what we believe and because of our allegiance to the God who lays claim to us.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, although persecution in the Western cultural context may not lead to death, we still need to consider in what ways we refuse to live by faith for fear of standing out.

The consensus is that canonical apocalyptic literature offers much to those willing to do the hard work of studying it. Craddock writes, “But for the preacher who will linger in the text until the eyes adjust to the brilliant obscurity, the ears discern the words in trumpet blasts, and the heart is no longer a stranger amid terrible splendor, there is much to be seen and heard and to be proclaimed from the pulpit.”<sup>9</sup>

Likewise, Arthurs succinctly states, “Like a maze of high hedges with gold at the center, this genre does not easily yield its treasure.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Campbell, 143.

<sup>8</sup> Larry Paul Jones and Jerry L. Sumney, *Preaching Apocalyptic Texts* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1999), 7.

<sup>9</sup> Craddock, 271.

<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2007), 179.

Thus authors acknowledge the disparity between the real life circumstances of the recipients of canonical apocalyptic literature and that of postmoderns and yet still conclude it applies to contemporary culture. These authors then helpfully articulate various ways that apocalyptic literature is applicable to the postmodern world.<sup>11</sup>

### **Applying Canonical Apocalyptic Literature to Contemporary Culture**

Authors who have written on preaching and applying apocalyptic literature to contemporary audiences identify seven related themes in apocalyptic literature that are applicable to the postmodern world: Christianity as a minority, suffering and tribulation, evil and God's sovereignty, the wrath of God, the centrality of Jesus the Messiah, discipleship, and doxology. These categories are adapted from Craddock, who suggests seven themes from the book of Revelation that are relevant to congregations in the twentieth/twenty-first century.<sup>12</sup> As authors deal with these issues, very few directly engage with the unique features of postmodern culture and ways that canonical apocalyptic literature addresses the salient features of postmodernity.

The first major theme in canonical apocalyptic literature that authors apply to contemporary culture is the theme of Christianity as a minority. Zechariah and Ezekiel were composed during the exile when Israel was a minority community in Babylon and Persia. Daniel was either composed in exile, or possible in the third century AD when

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<sup>11</sup> In these works, most authors do not explicitly identify their culture as postmodern. However, the "modern audiences" whom they had in mind are postmodern.

<sup>12</sup> He lists faith struggling under oppression, the Lordship of Jesus, the death and resurrection of Jesus, the paradox of the Lamb's victory through suffering, the corporate struggle of the church against evil, the reality of evil, and a call to worship. See Craddock, "Preaching the Book of Revelation," *Interpretation* 40, no. 3 (July 1986): 270-82; also see Arthurs' summary in *Preaching with Variety*, 188-93.

the Seleucids were in power. In any and all of those circumstances, faithful Jews who sought to follow God were in the cultural minority.<sup>13</sup> The first readers of John's Revelation were a tiny fraction of the population of the Roman Empire. Therefore, Jones and Sumney describe the preacher of apocalyptic literature as one who "states without equivocation that the surrounding culture not only is not Christian but also is against Christianity."<sup>14</sup> They go on to say, "The opposition to the church and oppression of the church by cultural and societal norms and mores represent not minor annoyances to the faithful, but major threats to the fidelity owed to God."<sup>15</sup> Briggs focuses on the marginalization of believers in contemporary culture: "...in spite of the fact that everything in the world around us pushes Christianity out to the edges and suggests that it might just be a primitive superstition that we are now finally growing out of, it turns out that God is still the one in charge of world history, and of today's nations and empires."<sup>16</sup>

Christians in contemporary Western culture may not be imprisoned for their faith, but they are marginalized. Apocalyptic literature drives contemporary readers to ask in what ways they face a culture that stands against Christianity. As a variation on the theme of how Christian's function as a minority, Campbell applies Revelation 5 to violent responses to persecution. He suggests that responding to persecution by

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<sup>13</sup> I will explore the contexts of the original recipients of canonical apocalyptic literature in chapter 4.

<sup>14</sup> Jones and Sumney, 27.

<sup>15</sup> Jones and Sumney, 37.

<sup>16</sup> Richard S. Briggs, *Reading the Bible Wisely*, rev, ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 113-14.

retributive acts of violence is shown to be inadequate in light of the Lamb who stands as slain. In his sermon “Audacity,” he refers to the massacre at Columbine High School. He says that “the vision of the slaughtered Lamb” offers an alternative to the myth of redemptive violence.<sup>17</sup>

While Christians in contemporary Western culture may not suffer martyrdom often, they still suffer. The second major theme in canonical apocalyptic literature that applies to contemporary readers is suffering and tribulation. Not all suffering is from persecution, and therefore “The apocalyptic preacher does not make light of the tribulations of the faithful, but will not allow the faithful to blame God for them.”<sup>18</sup> Much of canonical apocalyptic literature offers explanations of trials. Regarding Revelation 12-13, Sandy writes, “The function of the vision was to explain why the saints were faced with trials and how to handle them.”<sup>19</sup> Some apocalyptic texts offer hope to those in suffering. Willimon applies the transcendent vision of the heavenly throne of God in Revelation 5 to a young man on death row and a family with a paralyzed son.<sup>20</sup>

Canonical apocalyptic texts focus on the problem of evil and God’s sovereignty, the third major theme in apocalyptic literature applied to contemporary readers. The consistent message is clear: God is still sovereign, despite the existence of evil.

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<sup>17</sup> Campbell, 162.

<sup>18</sup> Jones and Sumney, 29.

<sup>19</sup> D. Brent Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 122.

<sup>20</sup> William Willimon, “Good Show,” *Preaching Through the Apocalypse*, edited by Cornish R. Rogers, and Joseph R. Jeter, Jr. (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1992), 90.

Furthermore, God will not allow evil to exist forever. Texts that deal with evil are somewhat easier to apply directly to contemporary readers than those that deal with martyrdom or persecution. In light of encountering evil, O'Grady challenges his hearers to turn to the Lamb: "Today, the forces of evil continue to exert a powerful influence on the thoughts and attitudes of people in every country... Then it is time to turn back to Revelation and find the truth that is in the humility of the lamb that ultimate power resides."<sup>21</sup>

The fourth major theme in canonical apocalyptic literature that authors apply to contemporary culture is the wrath of God. Here scholars and preachers struggle to accommodate contemporary Western culture's distaste for God's wrath. As they apply God's wrath described in Revelation 14, Jones and Sumney wrestle with the tension between God's love and his wrath. They ask with their readers, "What does this God of wrath have to do with a God who loves the world and cares for the people of faith like a good shepherd?"<sup>22</sup> They acknowledge, "The scene in Revelation 14 makes us cringe, but it has ample Biblical company."<sup>23</sup> Cringing at the wrath of God may be a particularly Western response, if not postmodern. Rather than simply cringe, these texts call us to worship God in light of his justice, judgment, and wrath. Jones and Sumney's approach would be stronger if, after acknowledging the difficulty of God's wrath, they had focused on doxology in light of God's justice and judgment.

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<sup>21</sup> Ron O'Grady, "The Strength of Weakness," *Preaching Through the Apocalypse*, edited by Cornish R. Rogers, and Joseph R. Jeter, Jr. (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1992), 86.

<sup>22</sup> Jones and Sumney, 141.

<sup>23</sup> Jones and Sumney, 142.

Jeter's approach to difficult apocalyptic texts that refer to God's wrath is to argue, in some cases, for a re-imagining of the text "...without reducing its overall impact."<sup>24</sup> His motivation here is to reduce contemporary readers' shock, but that is precisely what the authors intended. His approach short circuits the rhetorical shock and awe effect of these texts. God's judgment is shocking, and we need to be shocked into taking God seriously.

Canonical apocalyptic literature also reflects the centrality of Jesus the Messiah, the fifth major theme applied to contemporary readers. In Old Testament canonical apocalyptic literature this theme is expressed in prophecies about the Messiah. In the New Testament book of Revelation, it is seen in a focus on Jesus as the Lamb who was slain. The message of both testaments is that the ultimate problems of suffering, evil, persecution, and sin are resolved by the ministry of Jesus the Messiah. Regarding the Lamb slain revealed in Revelation 5 Craddock states, "The Lamb slain says that God *will*; all that must be done will be done for the redemption of creation."<sup>25</sup> Jones and Sumney state, "The Christian apocalyptic preacher proclaims the crucified, resurrected, and enthroned Jesus."<sup>26</sup>

Given the apocalyptic realities of persecution, suffering, and death, it is not surprising that discipleship is a major focus of canonical apocalyptic literature. Following God and walking by faith tend to be easier when life is going great. Walking

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<sup>24</sup> Jeter, 29.

<sup>25</sup> Craddock, 276.

<sup>26</sup> Jones and Sumney, 34.

by faith can be an immense challenge amidst suffering and persecution. Arthurs writes, “Preachers announce that history is predetermined, and the Lamb will win, *so we must decide now which side to follow.*”<sup>27</sup> In reference to the book of Revelation, Craddock states “The cross is the definitive paradigm of the Christian life.”<sup>28</sup> The Christian life as revealed in Revelation is that of the overcomer, the one who will not capitulate to the beast, his false prophet, or the dragon.

The emphasis on discipleship is an emphasis on life change in light of certain truths. A. Collins states, “On the deepest level, the Apocalypse expresses an interpretation of reality and exhorts its audience to live in a way that is an appropriate response to that interpretation.”<sup>29</sup> While she doesn’t go into much detail, her point is that when the book of Revelation is rightly understood, it results in real change. With regard to Revelation, those changes are watermarks of being a follower of the Lamb rather than the Beast.<sup>30</sup> A Collins’ approach to Revelation does not take seriously the prophetic, future telling aspect. For her, Revelation is only an imaginative reinterpretation of reality. The change she describes would be more lasting and effective if the prophecies were real, rather than imagined.

The seventh major theme in canonical apocalyptic literature that authors apply to contemporary culture is doxology. A common motif in canonical apocalyptic works is

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<sup>27</sup> Arthurs, 192. Emphasis mine.

<sup>28</sup> Craddock, “Preaching the Book of Revelation,” *Interpretation* 40, no. 3 (July 1986): 276.

<sup>29</sup> A. Y. Collins, “Reading the Book of Revelation in the Twentieth Century,” *Interpretation* 40, no. 3 (July 1986): 242.

<sup>30</sup> Most of the examples here are taken from Revelation, because most of the literature on preaching apocalyptic texts deals with Revelation.

worship in the form of outbursts of praise to God. If the souls of the martyred saints can worship while waiting for God's justice to be done, then the average contemporary Christian can surely do the same. Arthurs explains that a key function of apocalyptic literature is to produce hope and praise.<sup>31</sup> He states, "Hope is raised and faith is renewed when preachers announce that the Lamb who was slain will be enthroned in the New Jerusalem."<sup>32</sup>

With a few notable exceptions, authors who apply apocalyptic literature to contemporary culture often fail to offer an analysis of distinct features of postmodernism. To give adequate space to the unique challenges of postmodernism is beyond the focus of many of these works. Furthermore, most of the literature analyzing postmodernism has been written in the last two decades, after the publication of many of the books and articles that address preaching apocalyptic literature. Because these authors do not delve into how contemporary culture is postmodern, or how features of postmodern culture might impact applying canonical apocalyptic literature, they fail to identify key ways that canonical apocalyptic literature is uniquely suited to answer the problem of parataxis in postmodern culture.

The small handful of authors who do directly engage the unique issues of postmodern culture give glimpses of the ways canonical apocalyptic literature is especially applicable to postmodernity. These authors specifically address the

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<sup>31</sup> Arthurs, 188-93.

<sup>32</sup> Arthurs, 192.



postmodern issues of moral relativism, the question of why God would allow evil and suffering, loss of hope, and atheism.

Pluralism is not unique to postmodern culture, but it is the bedrock of postmodernism. However, there is no room for moral relativism in apocalyptic literature. Right is right, wrong is wrong, and God will ultimately sort it all out. Arthurs addresses the inconsistency of the worldview of canonical apocalyptic works and postmodernity. He states, “Apocalyptic rejects moral relativism. Preachers should too.”<sup>33</sup> Forbes mentions pluralism, a key component of postmodern culture, as he considers the challenges of applying the book of Revelation: “we have to do all this work in an increasingly PLURALISTIC environment.”<sup>34</sup>

The problem of evil is also not distinctively postmodern, but it has found new expression in the postmodern world devoid of absolutes. In a sermon on Revelation 4, Boring considers how the vision of heaven addresses the ultimate question of why. He refers in the sermon to Heidegger and Tillich (postmodern philosophers), but then moves quickly to the honest question of a man in his congregation injured in a car accident who asked him, “Pastor, can you tell me why?”<sup>35</sup> He goes on to say, “He was no philosopher by disposition, just one who lived, and dared to look beneath the surface

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<sup>33</sup> Arthurs, 192.

<sup>34</sup> James A. Forbes, Jr., “Preaching on the Eve of a New Millennium,” *Preaching Through the Apocalypse*, edited by Cornish R. Rogers, and Joseph R. Jeter, Jr. (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1992), 41, emphasis his.

<sup>35</sup> Eugene M. Boring, “Everything Is Going to be Alright,” *Preaching Through the Apocalypse*, edited by Cornish R. Rogers, and Joseph R. Jeter, Jr. (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1992), 79.

of life.”<sup>36</sup> He answers, “Bursting from John’s picture comes a response to that mostly unspoken question buried within us all. Why anything? Because one God created all things and willed that they exist!”<sup>37</sup>

Postmodernism has struggled to cope with life after the modern dilemma of the World Wars. The transcendent apocalyptic visions of eschatological salvation offer hope in a hopeless and pessimistic world. Buttrick confronts the postmodern loss of hope directly in a sermon on Revelation 21-22. He says, “Without hope, nothing is possible and, therefore, nothing attempted. Maybe that’s what happened to us in America. We dreamed an American dream. But then there were two World Wars, plus Korea, Vietnam, Watergate, Irangate, and sad Nicaragua... Listen, without hope nations do perish. So do people. We cannot live without hope.”<sup>38</sup>

Postmodernism is distinctly atheistic. True atheism is more prevalent now than it has ever been in Western culture. Additionally, postmodern people often display a practical atheism in their life choices, regardless of their religious views. Even the practical atheist or agnostic has not escaped the problem of suffering and evil. Lurvey applies Revelation 11 and 13 by considering God’s decision to delay his ultimate destruction of evil. We struggle with oppression, war, earthquakes, care accidents, cancer, etc. He says, “We cry out to the stars, like Albert Camus, and vent our rage

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<sup>36</sup> Boring, 79.

<sup>37</sup> Boring, 79.

<sup>38</sup> David G. Buttrick, “Poetry of Hope,” *Preaching Through the Apocalypse*, edited by Cornish R. Rogers, and Joseph R. Jeter, Jr. (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1992), 162.

against the God we don't believe in anymore."<sup>39</sup> He concludes by identifying the challenge of lukewarm Christianity to contemporary readers, "He challenged them and he still challenges us to respond to the Christian calling to a heroic life right where we are: in the packing houses, classrooms, computer terminals, restaurants, and apartments where we all live and move..."<sup>40</sup>

Authors that deal with applying canonical apocalyptic literature apply its major themes to contemporary readers. Most do not explicitly mention or deal with aspects of postmodern culture. Those who do so display a few ways that canonical apocalyptic literature addresses postmodern problems. One interesting characteristic of the majority of literature on applying canonical apocalyptic literature is a non-futurist interpretive viewpoint.

### **The Problem of a Non-Futuristic Hermeneutic**

The literature on preaching canonical apocalyptic texts is primarily written from a non-futurist interpretive perspective of prophecy. These authors acknowledge their viewpoints, and offer their works as a corrective to futurist interpretations and applications of canonical apocalyptic literature. They interpret canonical apocalyptic literature in an exclusively transformative way. That is, rather than actually depict the future, they hold that canonical apocalyptic literature transforms the way in which

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<sup>39</sup> John M. Luvery, Jr., "Prophets Versus the Beasts," *Preaching Through the Apocalypse*, edited by Cornish R. Rogers, and Joseph R. Jeter, Jr. (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1992), 116.

<sup>40</sup> Luvery, 118.

people should view their contemporary world. This approach to canonical apocalyptic literature unintentionally robs these texts of their hope-giving message.

Authors who write from a non-futurist interpretive perspective of prophecy fail to seriously engage the futurist interpretation of apocalyptic literature. They effectively throw the baby of futurist hermeneutics out with the bathwater of TV evangelists and hyper-dispensational date-setters. In *Preaching Through the Apocalypse*, Rogers laments, “TV evangelists and evangelical preachers everywhere are preaching with great effect their fundamentalistic interpretation of the book.”<sup>41</sup> Jacobsen asserts, “We don’t need dispensationalist timetables and slick-haired TV prophecy: we believe in Christ, who has already died and risen.”<sup>42</sup> Briggs says, “Revelation is too often the happy hunting ground of religious lunatics and extremists, or of people who great concern in life appears to be trying to work out when the ‘rapture’ will happen or how ‘premillennial’ you are.”<sup>43</sup> He goes on to say, “apocalyptic is *not about the end of the world*.”<sup>44</sup>

Surprisingly, some of these authors suggest that canonical apocalyptic literature does not convey the message that God will ultimately intervene in history. A. Collins confidently asserts, “A hermeneutic which takes historical criticism seriously can no

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<sup>41</sup> Cornish R. Rogers, “Preaching Values in the Book of Revelation,” *Preaching through the Apocalypse*, ed. by Cornish R. Rogers and Joseph R. Jeter, Jr. (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1992), 3.

<sup>42</sup> Jacobsen, 108.

<sup>43</sup> Richard S. Briggs, *Reading the Bible Wisely* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 105.

<sup>44</sup> Briggs, 106. Emphasis his.

longer work with an interventionist notion of God.”<sup>45</sup> And again, “The biblical apocalypses are viewed not as forecasts of what is to be, but as interpretations of how things were, are, and ought to be.”<sup>46</sup> Jones and Sumney write, “Apocalyptic thought does not compel us to believe that God moves history toward some single, ultimate, once-and-for-all, catastrophic, and cataclysmic denouement.”<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, Arthurs is a good example of one author who embraces the reality of future fulfillment. He says, “Prophecy tells its recipients that if they repent, disaster can be avoided. The world is redeemable. Apocalyptic tells the faithful that the world is too far gone. Only the impending cataclysm will set things right, so hang on!”<sup>48</sup>

These authors are right to recognize the hermeneutic issue. Jeter states this explicitly, “If Revelation-as-prediction is rejected, how are we to interpret the thought of this difficult book?”<sup>49</sup> He dismisses the futuristic element of prophecy at the outset of his discussion, “Prophecy has less to do with predicting the future than it does with the claim that the message has been received through divine revelation and is delivered in the name and by the authority of God.”<sup>50</sup> Futurist interpreters also acknowledge that not all prophecy is future-telling. But to suggest that no prophecy in canonical

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<sup>45</sup> A. Y. Collins, “Reading the Book of Revelation,” 242.

<sup>46</sup> A. Y. Collins, “Reading the Book of Revelation,” 231.

<sup>47</sup> Jones and Sumney, 34.

<sup>48</sup> Arthurs, 180.

<sup>49</sup> Joseph R. Jeter, Jr., “Revelation-based Preaching: Homiletic Approaches,” *Preaching through the Apocalypse*, ed. by Cornish R. Rogers and Joseph R. Jeter, Jr. (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1992), 25.

<sup>50</sup> Jeter, 22.

apocalyptic literature is future telling is a different story. Such a hermeneutical presupposition robs apocalyptic literature of its promise: what is seen in the visions accurately (albeit symbolically) may represent the past, present, or future.

This anti-futuristic bent impacts how authors understand and apply apocalyptic literature to postmodernism. Regarding OT apocalyptic literature, Jones and Sumney state, "...given the failure of other nationalistic hopes expressed by the prophets, apocalyptic thought relocated those hopes outside the realm of history."<sup>51</sup> This is radically different than suggesting that Israel hopes were relocated to the *future*. If salvation is deferred to the future then the message is "wait with hope." If salvation is removed to another dimension, the message is "close your eyes and imagine." The problem of parataxis in postmodernism is a problem of hopelessness. If canonical apocalyptic literature offers a meta-narrative that includes God intervening in the future, then there is hope for the postmodern. If canonical apocalyptic literature merely offers a distraction from a paratactic view of life, then there is no hope.

Due to their presupposition that a futurist interpretation of prophecy is flawed, these authors focus on the transformational function of canonical apocalyptic literature. They emphasize the way canonical apocalyptic literature changes perceptions of the world of the reader, which for them is the key to making application of such literature today and allows them to exclude or ignore the concept of an apocalyptic prophecy fulfilled in the future. They assert that apocalyptic literature offers a new lens through which the contemporary reader can view their world. Jacobsen uses the image of a

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<sup>51</sup> Jones and Sumney, 12.

stained glass window as an illustration of this function of apocalyptic literature. He describes a stained glass window picturing the new Jerusalem and writes, “When looking through the new Jerusalem window, you see your own world in a different light: both as it is and as it might be.”<sup>52</sup> He goes on to say, “apocalyptic texts...afford preachers and congregations the opportunity to view ourselves and our world in a new way.”<sup>53</sup> Rogers makes a similar point when he says that the images of the book of Revelation have the power “to *unmask appearances*, to unveil the truth about the world and ourselves.”<sup>54</sup> Briggs states, “We should say then that Revelation is a book about *the end of the world as we know it*, in the sense that it changes the way we know—and changes what we know—about this world in which we live.”<sup>55</sup>

Identifying the transformative function of apocalyptic literature is helpful in many ways, and it is one of the key ways that canonical apocalyptic literature functions. However, these authors use it exclusively and avoid any futurist approach to apocalyptic literature. Rather than consider the possibility of future fulfillment of any elements in canonical apocalyptic literature, especially the book of Revelation, they focus on reinterpreting the present in light of the apocalyptic perspective. Only in the most broad sense do these authors allow for future fulfillment of apocalyptic prophecies. For example, Jones and Sumney grant, “The certainty of God’s final victory is central to

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<sup>52</sup> Jacobsen, xi.

<sup>53</sup> Jacobsen, xi.

<sup>54</sup> Cornish R. Rogers, “Preaching Values in the Book of Revelation,” *Preaching through the Apocalypse*, ed. by Cornish R. Rogers and Joseph R. Jeter, Jr. (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1992), 1, emphasis his.

<sup>55</sup> Briggs, 106.

apocalyptic thought.”<sup>56</sup> Canonical apocalyptic texts, in their view, include visions that generically affirm that ultimately God will be victorious, not visions that represent (in one way or another) God’s actual future victory. Discussing God’s wrath in the final harvest of earth described in Revelation 14:19-20, they write of John, “Was it wrong for him to envision a God of passing judgment?” Note the assumption that John “envisioned” this scene. Rather than seeing the harvest of Revelation 14 as a Spirit-inspired vision indicating symbolically what is to come, they see it as a Spirit-inspired reflection on God’s attitude towards those who persecute the church.

Those who approach applying canonical apocalyptic texts from an exclusively non-futurist interpretive perspective of prophecy unintentionally miss out on the primary way that these texts apply to the problems of postmodernity. They emphasize the transformational role of canonical apocalyptic literature, and consequently de-emphasize the hope-giving nature of the prophecies of God’s destruction of evil and ultimate salvation of sinners at the end of the age.

### **Conclusion**

In chapter three I have reviewed key literature on applying canonical apocalyptic texts to postmodern culture. This literature is limited to a handful of books in the field of homiletics, journal articles, and relevant sections of commentaries and works in the field of hermeneutics.

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<sup>56</sup> Jones and Sumney, 16.



In chapter four I will first survey non-canonical apocalyptic literature, noting the author, original audience, occasion, narrative framework, and message. I will limit this research to works for which we have good idea of historical circumstances and to works dating to the 1st/2nd century AD or prior. I will then survey canonical apocalyptic works, noting the author, original audience, occasion, narrative framework, and message. I will then compare the function of the narrative framework in the various apocalyptic texts and note how it contributes to the message. Finally, I will demonstrate how the message of canonical apocalyptic literature addresses the problem of parataxis in postmodernism.

On the deepest level, the Book of Revelation provides a story in and through which the people of God discover who they are and what they are to do.

—A. Y. Collins, “Reading the Book of Revelation”

## CHAPTER FOUR

### PROJECT DESIGN

#### **Introduction**

My thesis is canonical apocalyptic literature restores the lost meta-narrative in postmodern culture by providing a visionary representation of future victory for the people of God anchored in the narrated experience of the vision recipient. I will start by analyzing the narrative-providing function of selected samples of non-canonical apocalyptic literature in its original context. I have limited these selections to texts composed during the late 1st century or early 2nd century AD or earlier, as they provide the most relevant background for canonical apocalyptic texts. I will demonstrate how canonical apocalyptic literature functioned in the same way as the non-canonical examples for its original audience, noting the key differences between canonical and non-canonical apocalyptic texts. From that foundation, I will explore how canonical apocalyptic literature, inspired by God, supplies a meta-narrative for post modern culture. I will test these conclusions by conducting a focus group before and after preaching a sermon series on Romans 12-13. While my focus is on the nature of apocalyptic literature and how it functions, it is important to note that in preaching canonical apocalyptic texts we cannot merely explain these texts. In fact, many of the

unique challenges of apocalyptic literature demand that we do more than just explain how they function. I will address this issue in the discussion of outcomes in chapter five.

### **Non-canonical Apocalyptic Literature**

The genre of apocalyptic literature is designed to provide a narrative for people who have lost their narrative through various circumstances. The context and message of non-canonical apocalyptic texts demonstrate how prophecies of victory addressed the need for a narrative for marginalized or disenfranchised people. Sparks notes that with one notable exception, Mesopotamian and Egyptian proto-apocalyptic texts were written in social contexts where “the authors appear to represent relatively marginalized communities.”<sup>1</sup> The purpose of these texts is to provide hope and legitimacy via the authoritative voice of a prophet visited by a divine messenger. In well-formed apocalyptic texts, the narrative comes in the form of a visionary representation of future victory, and is anchored to reality by the narrative framework of the vision-receiving event. Examples from Mesopotamian and Egyptian proto-apocalyptic texts, Jewish apocalypses from during and after the Seleucid period (roughly 150 BC to AD 70), and Jewish apocalypses from the Roman period after the destruction of the 2<sup>nd</sup> temple (after

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<sup>1</sup> Kenton Sparks, *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 250.

AD 70), demonstrate how apocalyptic literature provides a narrative for readers in a hopeless, marginalized, or disenfranchised context.<sup>2</sup>

### Mesopotamian & Egyptian Proto-Apocalyptic Texts

Non-canonical proto-apocalyptic texts from Mesopotamia and Egypt show the emergence of the narrative-providing function of prophetic literature, including some apocalyptic elements. Mesopotamian proto-apocalyptic texts demonstrate how prophetic visions of future victory were used for political and social agendas. While we don't have all the details about the social circumstances of these works, the examples given below illustrate how the prophetic revelation of future victory from an authoritative prophetic source was designed to give hope.

The Šulgi Prophetic Speech, a Babylonian prophetic oracle, provided a military and political narrative for Babylon in the 12<sup>th</sup> century BC. The work presents itself as prophecy of Babylon's future given in 21<sup>st</sup> century to king Šulgi, even though it was composed in 12<sup>th</sup> century BC. It is political propaganda. The text predicts Babylon's history down to the 12<sup>th</sup> century BC, and concludes with prophecy of Babylon's restoration from an unidentified enemy.<sup>3</sup> During the 12<sup>th</sup> century BC Babylon was subject to the Kassite people group. Sparks suggests that the text is intended to provide

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<sup>2</sup> Persian apocalyptic works have been very difficult to date accurately due to the lack of texts before the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD. Collins summarizes the Persian apocalyptic features that were in existence during the Hellenistic age as "the periodization of history, eschatological woes, resurrection, and the supernatural forces of good and evil." Cf. John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 32. Unfortunately, we don't have any information about the specific social circumstances surrounding Persian apocalyptic works, therefore I have not included them in this study.

<sup>3</sup> Sparks, 242.

hope that Babylon will be freed from Kassite domination.<sup>4</sup> The Šulgi Prophetic Speech prophesies future victory for the Babylonians from their enemy, presumably the Kassites. From the perspective of the text, the Babylonian narrative will continue as it had since the days of Šulgi, even beyond the Kassite period. Note that the use of a key Babylonian king of the past lent credibility to the prophecy and connected Babylon's future with its glorious past.

The Uruk Prophecy, a third person narrative history that details good and bad kings through Babylon's history, provides a narrative where the city of Uruk returns to prominence through the rebuilding of its temples. The list of kings culminates with *eventu* prophecy of Nebuchadnezzar II who would rebuild temples in Uruk, and then offers an eschatological vision of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar's son. Sparks says, "... we can safely presume that the text was written after Nebuchadnezzar's reign during the reign of his son, Evil-Merodach. The Uruk Prophecy was therefore composed during the Late Babylonian period when a priest in Uruk took up his stylus to support a dynasty favorably disposed to his city."<sup>5</sup> The author perceived Uruk to be out of favor, and composed a "prophecy" that renewed the importance of Uruk. Lambert says,

The document is clearly a product of the city of Uruk, which had very ancient cultural traditions that had been maintained, but was not the political capital, that position being indisputably Babylon's. Thus the Urukean prophecy has tacitly passed over all the Assyrian puppet rulers in Babylon and records only their Assyrian masters: a combination of chauvinism and political realism.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Sparks, 242.

<sup>5</sup> Sparks, 243.

<sup>6</sup> W. G. Lambert, *The Background of Jewish Apocalyptic* (London: Athlone Press, University of London, 1978), 11-12.

In this case, the author of the Uruk Prophecy felt that Uruk had been disenfranchised in light of Babylon's prominence, and offered prophecy of future victory to restore hope and importance to city that had lost importance.

The Dynastic Prophecy, composed in Babylon during the Hellenistic period sometime before the fall of the Seleucid empire, provides a vision of future victory from the Seleucid reign. The text contains *ex-eventu* prophecy of the Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, and Greek empires using an alternative paradigm of good and bad dynasties. The presumptive end of the text is a prophecy of the end of the "evil" Seleucid empire. The end of the text as we have it includes the line, "The people who had ex[perienced] misfortune [will enjoy] well-being."<sup>7</sup> The Dynastic Prophecy, therefore, "presented a message of hope that the Hellenistic Seleucids would be destroyed and replaced by a favorable native Babylonian dynasty."<sup>8</sup> This narrative never became reality. Despite the fact that we don't possess a complete version, the function of the prophetic narrative is clear: misfortune would give way to well-being, in the form of victory over the Seleucids.

The Demotic Chronicle, an oracle presented as a commentary on older Egyptian prophecy, offers a vision of future victory to Egypt during the rise of the Persian empire. Sparks summarizes how this oracle re-interpreted the older Egyptian prophecy: "The commentary interpreted the prophecies so that predictions leading up to the reign of Pharaoh Teos (365-60 B.C.E.) had already been fulfilled and predictions of events after

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<sup>7</sup> William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr., eds., *The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2003), 482, Accordance ed.

<sup>8</sup> Sparks, 244.

Teos lay in the future.”<sup>9</sup> During Teos’ reign, Egypt was under threat from Persia. The text prophesies of a king who would successfully restore Egyptian independent rule. It was probably written by priests who wanted to ignite a rebellion against Greece.<sup>10</sup> The author projected a new narrative, different from the current reality in Egypt, and based in on authoritative oracles from Egypt’s past. Once again, the prophecy of future victory offered hope to a disenfranchised Egypt.

These examples of proto-apocalyptic literature from Mesopotamia and Egypt show how prophetic visions and oracles of future victory were used to provide a narrative for people under domination by another nation, people who felt marginalized, or people who were no longer independent. In each case, an authoritative prophetic source offered a narrative of victory and restoration that would have offered hope to its readers.

### Jewish Apocalypses from the Seleucid Period

The Jewish apocalyptic texts composed during and after the Seleucid oppression utilize the same prophetic strategy of the Mesopotamian and Egyptian proto-apocalyptic texts, but they do so with more fully developed features of apocalyptic literature. The following examples show how these texts use a visionary representation of future victory, anchored in the narrated experience of the vision recipient, to provide a narrative for the Jewish people.

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<sup>9</sup> Sparks, 246.

<sup>10</sup> Sparks, 246.

Because these texts share a common social context, I will first review the general historical setting before highlighting a few key examples. The conquest of Alexander the Great in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC put pressure on the Jewish world to embrace the Hellenistic worldview and way of life.<sup>11</sup> After Alexander's death, Israel was effectively a pawn passed back and forth between the Ptolemy and Seleucid empires. Murphy notes, "When the Ptolemies took over Judea, cultural influences shifted. Greek and local Judean culture interacted in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, transforming Jewish life in ways not fully clear until later."<sup>12</sup> Monotheistic Judaism had been given room to breathe under Persian rule, but Greek language, culture, and religion was far less accommodating. Some in the Jewish world would embrace a Hellenistic world view, while others viewed such decisions as idolatry and apostasy (cf. 2 Maccabees 4:7-17).

In this context, the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV came to power (175 BC). He supported the high priestly coup of Jason in Jerusalem against his more traditional brother Onias. Jason himself was ousted by another Hellenistic leaning priest, Menelaus. Jason retaliated by attacking Jerusalem, seeking to reclaim the high priesthood. Antiochus IV was outraged by this rebellion, and in 167 BC he personally came to Jerusalem with his army to settle the issue. He sought to impose a Hellenistic way of life on Jerusalem through extreme measures. According to 1 Maccabees 1:20-28

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<sup>11</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, *A History of Israel* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 456. Kaiser calls Alexander the Great "the Apostle of Hellenism."

<sup>12</sup> Frederick J. Murphy, *Apocalypticism in the Bible and Its World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), loc. 1750, Kindle.



and 2 Maccabees 6:1-11 he outlawed possession of the Torah, the practice of circumcision, and temple sacrifices. Those who refused to comply were tortured or executed. He went on to offer Greek sacrifices in the Jewish temple, including sacrifices of pig (which would have included eating a holy meal made up of pork, an unclean food for Jews according to Leviticus 11). During this timeframe the Maccabees led their revolt against the Seleucids, but they “soon took on the trappings and institutions of a Hellenistic dynasty.”<sup>13</sup>

Given the pressures of Hellenization and apostasy, the apocalyptic works from this period focus on the future eschatological victory of the righteous and the judgment of the wicked. This eschatological narrative, delivered as pseudepigrapha via the voice of ancient heroes and prophets of the Jewish faith, was used to motivate people to live righteous lives even if they were marginalized in their own society. Examples from 1 Enoch, the Apocalypse of Zephaniah, and the Apocryphon of Ezekiel show how this vision of future victory provided a hope-giving narrative for the Jewish people in light of Hellenistic pressure and Seleucid oppression.

The book of 1 Enoch is a collection of works that utilize the key figure Enoch from Genesis to deliver prophetic messages relevant to the situation of the author. Some of these works also circulated independently, so each section is treated as an independent unit.<sup>14</sup> The key apocalyptic portions are The Book of the Watchers (1-36), The Apocalypse of Weeks (93:3-14, 91:12-17), and The Animal Apocalypse (85-90).

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<sup>13</sup> Murphy, loc. 1804, Kindle.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Bauckham, “Apocalypses,” *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic), 135-36.

The Book of the Watchers dates to the late 3<sup>rd</sup> or early 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, and addresses the problem of the judgment of evil.<sup>15</sup> The Watchers are the angels who procreated with human women from Genesis 6:1-4. In The Book of the Watchers they are the source of evil in the world. Enoch is given a tour of the universe, mediated by angels, where he is shown the judgment that awaits the Watchers as well as wicked humans. Bauckham summarizes the way the narrative works, “The world in Enoch’s time functions as a type of the implied readers’ world and the judgments of the Watchers and humanity at the time of the flood are a type of the coming last judgment, through which the righteous will be saved from angelic and human evil.”<sup>16</sup> The Jewish people were feeling the pressures of Hellenization, and the Book of the Watchers is “doubtless a polemic and warning against pagan culture and learning.”<sup>17</sup> The evil are “economic exploiters, the political oppressors, and the socially unjust people of the world.”<sup>18</sup> In this regard, Isaac writes that 1 Enoch helps us “to appreciate the revolutionary mood of Jews and their staunch opposition not only to Greek and Roman imperialism, but also to Jewish aristocracy itself.”<sup>19</sup>

Enoch’s narrated visionary journey serves to anchor the transcendent world of judgment to temporal reality on earth. The Book of the Watchers prophesies the victory

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<sup>15</sup> E. Isaac, in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, ed. by R. H. Charlesworth (Grand Rapids, MI: Hendrickson Publishers: 1983), 7.

<sup>16</sup> Bauckham, “Apocalypses,” 140.

<sup>17</sup> Bauckham, “Apocalypses,” 141.

<sup>18</sup> Isaac, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Isaac, 9.

of the righteous with a focus on the judgment of angelic and human evil. Angelic mediators serve as Enoch's guides, assuring readers that although the evil may prosper in this world, their judgment is assured. The narrative, told via the imagery and concepts of the anti-diluvian world, emphasizes that sinners will be judged. This provides hope for the righteous, and motivates them to live according God's Law in spite of the fact that they are marginalized. Enoch is the emissary of the righteous on his visionary journey. His experience of the heavenly journey, the narrative frame of the visions, serves as the link to the "seen" world. He sees the unseen world, and offers divine hope for the righteous in spite of evil's current state of prosperity.

The Apocalypse of Weeks is "a summary and interpretation of world history from creation to the new creation" that focuses on the judgment of evil.<sup>20</sup> The author divides history into ten neatly ordered weeks. According to Isaac and Bauckham, it was composed before the Maccabean revolt.<sup>21</sup> The seventh week of the history is the time of the writer, when "an apostate generation shall arise" (1 Enoch 93:9). The eighth week is a week of righteousness, while the ninth is the judgment and destruction of the righteous. In the tenth week angels conduct the "eternal judgment," and the first heaven will give way for a new heaven (1 Enoch 91:15-16). Once again, the focus is on the certainty of God's judgment of the wicked. The Jewish people, stuck in an apostate generation, should choose righteousness because of the future judgment of God. In that judgment, the righteous will be victorious, while the wicked will be destroyed.

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<sup>20</sup> Bauckham, "Apocalypses," 145.

<sup>21</sup> Isaac, 7. Cf. Bauckham, "Apocalypses," 147.

The author of 1 Enoch provides a narrative for his readers that has the evils of oppression and injustice in view. In 1 Enoch 91:19 “those who walk in the ways of injustice” will perish. People enduring oppression and injustice need a narrative that motivates them to endure. The systematic progression through ten well ordered weeks leaves no doubt that God will indeed judge those who oppress them. Bauckham says, “what they primarily need is hope and courage, not to be intimidated by the oppressors, not to be discouraged by their apparent impunity... The message of the certain doom of the wicked provides for this need.”<sup>22</sup> They needed a new narrative that gave them hope and motivated them to live righteously.

The Animal Apocalypse addresses the blasphemous acts done in the temple by Antiochus IV by providing a vision of a new temple and the restoration of Israel. The work itself is an allegory of the history of creation where animals are used to symbolize the various cast of characters. It was written during the Maccabean revolt, between 165 and 161 BC.<sup>23</sup> Adam is pictured as a white bull, while Cain and Abel are black and red. After the flood, humanity is represented by all kinds of animals. There is one white bull, Abraham. Jacob is a sheep, and true Israelites are white sheep. Of special interest is that the Maccabean revolt is mentioned in a positive light (1 Enoch 90:9-12). The 2<sup>nd</sup> temple is replaced by a glorious new temple (1 Enoch 90:28-29). Eventually, all humanity is transformed into white cows (1 Enoch 90:38). God’s people will be victorious, and even Gentiles who oppressed them will become worshippers of God.

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<sup>22</sup> Bauckham, “Apocalypses,” 146.

<sup>23</sup> Isaac, 7. Cf. Bauckham, “Apocalypses,” 147.

The lack of success of the initial Maccabean revolt meant the Jewish people needed motivation to maintain hope. This creative history of the world addresses hopelessness with various heroes from history, culminating in a new temple and the restoration of Israel. It literally provides a narrative for its audience by repackaging history in an allegory.

The Apocalypse of Zephaniah provides a narrative of the future judgment of the wicked and vindication of the righteous. It was written after the Maccabean period, between 100 BC and AD 70.<sup>24</sup> In this work the prophet Zephaniah recounts in the first person his heavenly journey where he witnesses the punishment of the wicked and the salvation of the righteous. The author likely wrote for the benefit of Jews in Egypt, focusing on divine judgment for sin as a deterrent.

Hellenistic pressures would have been ever greater in Egypt than they were in Palestine. In a context where faithful observance of Judaism would have been a minority viewpoint, this apocalypse provided the common apocalyptic narrative wherein the judgment of the wicked and the salvation of the righteous are the focus. The prophet Zephaniah serves as the divinely commissioned agent who received the vision of heaven. As with Enoch in *The Book of the Watchers*, Zephaniah sees the realities of heaven invisible to the common person, and by communicating them provides a narrative in which righteous living makes sense even as a minority under pressure to compromise.

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<sup>24</sup> Craig Evans, *Ancient Texts for New Testament Studies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 33. The Apocalypse of Zephaniah survives in fragmentary form.

These examples show how Jewish apocalypses from the Seleucid period until AD 70 provided a narrative for the Jewish people who were under pressure to adopt a Hellenistic worldview and faced oppression by Antiochus IV. They give visions of the future victory of the righteous and judgment of the wicked, using the narrated experience of a divinely commissioned prophet or man of God. They served to provide hope for the Jewish people and to motivate them to righteous living rather than compromise and idolatry.

#### Jewish Apocalypses after the Destruction of the Second Temple by Rome

The Jewish apocalyptic texts composed after the destruction of the 2<sup>nd</sup> temple by Rome address the Jewish people who once again were marginalized, disenfranchised, and had lost hope. If the Seleucid oppression of Antiochus IV and the pressures of Hellenization caused disenfranchisement of traditional Judaism, the Roman oppression that resulted in the destruction of the 2<sup>nd</sup> temple in AD 70 was a faith-shattering disaster. As Bauckham states, “It is well known that the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Romans in 70 CE was a traumatic event which eventually provoked major changes in Jewish religion and thought...”<sup>25</sup> The Jewish narrative was based on possession of the land of Israel promised to Abraham’s descendants by God and the existence of a temple in Jerusalem. The destruction of the temple called this narrative into doubt. How could God bless Rome and punish Israel? How could he allow his temple in Jerusalem to be destroyed for the second time? These questions fueled the

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<sup>25</sup> Bauckham, “Apocalypses,” 160.

production of more apocalyptic literature as “the catastrophe also raised profound theological and existential questions.”<sup>26</sup> The following examples show how these apocalyptic texts provide a narrative of future victory for their readers through the narrated experience of the vision recipient.

The familiar eschatological narrative of future judgment of sinners and salvation of the righteous is once again put to use in works like the Apocalypse of Abraham. The Apocalypse of Abraham was probably composed in the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. In this apocalypse Abraham rejects idolatry, and journeys to heaven where he witnesses the future of the world. Abraham struggles to understand the existence of evil. He asks God, “Why did it please you to bring it about that evil should be desired in the heart of man...” (Apocalypse of Abraham 23:14). He is told it is the result of human free will. Ultimately, God will judge Israel’s enemies. God tells Abraham, “But of the nation whom they shall serve I am the judge” (Apocalypse of Abraham 31:3).

In the Apocalypse of Abraham, Abraham’s role as the vision recipient is crucial. Who better to reveal to Israel their future victory and the judgment of Rome than Abraham himself? He had received the initial promises from God for Israel, and here he reveals Israel’s future hope through his vision journey experience.

4 Ezra and 2 Baruch offer two new developments to this familiar narrative. First, they address the loss of the 2<sup>nd</sup> temple using the destruction of the 1<sup>st</sup> temple as the narrative motif. Thus Rome is portrayed as Babylon, and historical persons from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, Ezra and Jeremiah’s scribe Baruch, are the mouthpieces for God’s message

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<sup>26</sup> Bauckham, “Apocalypses,” 160.

to the Jewish community in the late 1<sup>st</sup> and early 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. Second, Ezra and Baruch take a philosophical journey as they wrestle with the overall questions of God's mercy and the existence of evil. Both works arrive at the same conclusion as other apocalyptic works: sinners will be judged and the righteous vindicated, but they thoughtfully develop how the destruction of the temple could still be a part of God's plan and their narrative as a people.

4 Ezra offers a visionary representation of the future victory of righteous Jews. The book is a dialogue between Ezra and his angelic guide, Uriel. It was probably composed between AD 100 and AD 120.<sup>27</sup> As Ezra provides a narrative, he does so explicitly wrestling the problem of evil and the nature of epistemology. He is given various visions that help him come to understand that the destruction of the temple does not mean God has failed to uphold his covenant with Israel. Ezra's question to God in 4 Ezra 8:14 summarizes Ezra's existential/theological struggle, "If then you suddenly and quickly destroy him who with so great labor was fashioned by your command, to what purpose was he made?" One could easily see Ezra here going one of two ways: rejecting any concept of meta-narrative or embracing God's revelation to him through Uriel. Murphy states, "Ezra protests that it would be better not to exist at all than to suffer and not comprehend why. This is the quandary of humanity apart from apocalyptic knowledge—humanity has enough knowledge to cause it anguish, but not enough to answer its crucial questions."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, "4 Ezra," *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, ed. by R. H. Charlesworth (Grand Rapids, MI: Hendrickson Publishers: 1983), 521.

<sup>28</sup> Murphy, loc. 3366, Kindle.



Murphy rightly identifies the core issue in Ezra's discussion with Uriel as epistemology, "This fascinating dialogue between Uriel and Ezra is a sophisticated discussion of epistemology—what can humans know and how can they know it?"<sup>29</sup> The answer lies in special revelation from God. In 4 Ezra 4:2 Uriel says to Ezra, "Your understanding has utterly failed regarding this world, and do you think you can comprehend the way of the Most High?" Ezra despairs that he cannot know on his own, and says "It would be better for us not to be here than to come here and live in ungodliness, and to suffer and not understand why" (4 Ezra 4:12).<sup>30</sup> The future victory for the people of God in 4 Ezra is only for those who keep God's Law.<sup>31</sup>

2 Baruch expresses the same themes as 4 Ezra, and it also addresses the destruction of the second temple through the lens of first temple destruction. It was also composed between AD 100 and AD 120.<sup>32</sup> While Ezra questions Uriel throughout all of 4 Ezra, Baruch accepts God's answers throughout 2 Baruch. Baruch struggles not only with Israel's quandary after the destruction of the temple, but also with life in general. He says in 2 Baruch 21:13, "For if only this life exists which everyone possesses here, nothing could be more bitter than this." Bauckham summarizes the two main answers to the problem: "One is that salvation is to be found not in this transient world, but in the eternal age to come. The other is an understanding of Israel's punishment as

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<sup>29</sup> Murphy, loc. 3366, Kindle.

<sup>30</sup> "He does not grasp that understanding everyday experience is impossible without esoteric knowledge available only through direct revelation." Murphy, loc. 3366, Kindle.

<sup>31</sup> Bauckham, "Apocalypses," 174.

<sup>32</sup> A. F. J. Klijn, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, ed. by R. H. Charlesworth (Grand Rapids, MI: Hendrickson Publishers: 1983), 617.

chastisement with Israel's repentance in view."<sup>33</sup> In short, there is still a meta-narrative at work. On one hand, people must look beyond this temporal existence for ultimate salvation. On the other hand, even Israel's suffering is designed by God to accomplish repentance. At one point, Baruch says to the people, "For that which is now is nothing. But that which is in the future will be very great" (2 Baruch 44:8). After suffering earthly defeat by Rome, the message of 2 Baruch is that God is still at work, therefore they should hope in the future victory they will experience.

These examples of Jewish apocalypses show how apocalyptic literature provides a narrative through visionary representation of future victory for the righteous, anchored in the narrated experience of the vision recipient. Canonical apocalyptic literature was written in similar social conditions, and utilizes the same strategy of providing a narrative of future victory for the people of God through the narrated experience of the vision recipient.

### **Canonical Apocalyptic Literature**

Canonical apocalyptic literature functions in the same way as non-canonical apocalyptic literature. As non-canonical apocalyptic texts provided a narrative for people who were hopeless, disenfranchised, or marginalized, so canonical apocalyptic texts provided a narrative for its first audience in similar social conditions. Canonical apocalyptic texts were given by God in contexts when his people were marginalized and disenfranchised.

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<sup>33</sup> Bauckham, "Apocalypses," 177.

Biblical apocalyptic texts were written in two primary social contexts, with a possible third. The apocalyptic portions of Ezekiel and Zechariah were all given to Israel during the Babylonian exile and just after. The date of Daniel is disputed; some believe it was written during the Babylonian and Persian exile, while others date Daniel's apocalyptic portions to the Seleucid period, which we will discuss below.<sup>34</sup> Revelation was written during the last decade of the 1<sup>st</sup> century when Christians were marginalized and occasionally persecuted in the Roman empire. Each canonical apocalyptic text provides a narrative for its original audience through the visionary representation of future victory relevant to the social context of its original audience, anchored in the narrated experience of the vision recipient.

### Canonical Apocalypses from the Babylonian Exile & Return

#### *Ezekiel*

The narrative provided by canonical apocalyptic texts composed during the Babylonian exile reflect the circumstances of the exile. The people of Judah had been defeated by the Babylonians. Kaiser states, "The events surrounding the trauma of 586 BC created a crisis of unbelievable proportions for both the exiled community and the ragtag band of survivors left at Mizpah."<sup>35</sup> The population of Israel was taken to Babylon in 597 BC and 586 BC, and lived in exile as a minority in a foreign culture. They would have naturally questioned God's plan for them. They were tempted to

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<sup>34</sup> In either dating scheme, the people of Israel were marginalized.

<sup>35</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, *A History of Israel* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 409.

believe that the gods of Babylon were superior to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Their temple was destroyed; they were literally disenfranchised. In this context God gave apocalyptic visions to Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Daniel. In these apocalyptic parts of the Scripture, God provided Israel with powerful visions of their future story as the people of God.

Ezekiel's apocalyptic sections are dated precisely, and their message is tailored to the circumstances on Israel at those moments.<sup>36</sup> Ezekiel's overall message to Israel while in exile explained the reasons why God would allow Babylon to destroy Jerusalem and the temple, and offered Israel the hope of a restored Jerusalem and temple. Of Ezekiel's four apocalyptic sections, two were given prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and two were given after. The first two apocalyptic visions serve to set the stage for the hope filled visions at the end of the book.

Ezekiel's vision of the throne room of God in 1:4-3:15 sets the tone for the entire prophetic work, and lays the groundwork for the people Israel to interpret their circumstances as part of God's grand narrative for them. It is important to note that this vision was given to Ezekiel while in exile in 593 BC, before the destruction of the temple (Ezek 1:1-3). In the vision he witnesses the glory of God, and God commissions him to confront Israel's sin and call for repentance (Ezek 2:3-7). Ezekiel was given a scroll to eat with words of lamentation and mourning (Ezek 2:9-3:3). The scroll imagery is important, as it symbolizes God's decree regarding the judgment Ezekiel will

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<sup>36</sup> See chapter 2, pages 51 ff.

prophecy. God has a narrative for Israel, and in addition to the exile, part of that narrative was the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple.

Ezekiel's second vision further describes the crisis of Israel's narrative in theological terms. He journeys in a vision to Jerusalem and witnesses the wickedness in the temple and the departure of the glory of God from the temple. This portrays the destruction of Jerusalem as a consequence of Israel's sin (Ezek 8:1-11:24). This vision was given in 592 BC, still roughly five years prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. Israelites already in exile needed to understand that the geo-political events to come in Jerusalem were directly linked to their failure to worship God.

Ezekiel's third apocalyptic vision, the vision of the valley of dry bones, begins to tell the story of the restoration and victory of Israel. God will breathe new spiritual life into Israel, bringing them to repentance and back to the land (Ezek 37:11-14). This vision was given in 585 BC, just after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. The previously described judgments had occurred, and no doubt those in exile were stunned at the judgment of God. They needed to be reminded that just as God had judged them, he would restore them. Their narrative did not end with the burning of the temple, but with their resurrection envisioned in the dry bones coming to life. Note that the interpretation of the vision explicitly includes a reference to Israel's return to their land (Ezek 37:14). Even though they were in exile, their narrative wouldn't end in Babylon.

Finally, Ezekiel's fourth vision makes explicit Israel's future victory and restoration. In 573 BC he sees a detailed description of a restored Jerusalem and a rebuilt temple (Ezek 40:1-48:35). God's glory returns and fills this new temple (Ezek

44:4). Babylon is not Israel's end, but rather once again the people of Israel will live in the land God gave to their ancestors. The narrative of the vision completes the message of the book—yes, God has judged Israel for her sin, but he has not abandoned Israel or forgotten his promises.<sup>37</sup> The vision of future victory is the exact reversal of Israel's situation on the ground in Babylon. In Ezekiel God provides a narrative for his people, showing them visions not only of judgment, but of future victory.

Each of these visions is anchored to reality by the narrated experience of Ezekiel. His actions (worshipping God, eating a scroll, visiting Jerusalem, speaking to dry bones, touring the restored temple, etc.) while physically being in Babylon (Ezek 1:1, 8:1, possibly 40:1) communicate to Israel that the visions he saw were immediately relevant to them as they sat in exile. God had not forgotten Israel in Babylon. Quite the contrary, their time in Babylon was part of God's grand story.

The narrated vision experience functions in canonical apocalyptic literature differently than it does in non-canonical apocalyptic literature. Non-canonical apocalypses are pseudepigrapha, which means they were written by an anonymous author posing to be a famous person from the past in order to cast light on a present circumstance. Canonical apocalypses, however, are genuine apocalyptic visions given by the Spirit to a prophet. It is important for Israel that Ezekiel really did receive these visions while they were in Babylon. Ezekiel, therefore, provides a narrative for Israel in exile of their future victory and restoration, anchored to reality by his narrated experience receiving the visions.

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<sup>37</sup> As developed in chapter 2, note that the message provides great hope for Israel whether the city and temple is interpreted literally or spiritually. See page 53.

## *Zechariah*

Zechariah's eight visions provide a narrative where Jerusalem prospers and God judges sin. These visions were given to Israelites in Jerusalem in 519 BC, five months after those who had returned from exile started to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. From the perspective of the Israelites, the completion of the rebuilding of the temple was not guaranteed. Zechariah's visions served to bolster Israel's faith in God by revealing to them their future victory and prosperity.

Zechariah's first vision reveals a narrative to Israel by describing God's future judgment of her enemies and grace for Jerusalem. Zechariah sees horses (and presumably horsemen) who patrol the earth and find it at rest. This begs the question why isn't God judging Israel's enemies? The mediating angel argues for Jerusalem and Judah, and then announces God's gracious zeal for Jerusalem (Zech 1:8-17). Feinberg states, "The first vision gives the general theme of the whole series; the others add the details ... When the world was busy with its own affairs, God's eyes and the heart of the Messiah were upon the lowly estate of Israel and upon the temple in Jerusalem."<sup>38</sup> God had not forgotten Israel in her struggle to reconstitute the land. Quite the contrary, God had written this narrative and he affirmed "My cities shall again overflow with prosperity" (Zech 1:17).

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<sup>38</sup> Charles L. Feinberg, *God Remembers* (New York: American Board of Missions to the Jews, 1965), 38.

Zechariah's second, sixth, seventh, and eighth visions include God's judgment of sin as a key component for Israel's narrative as they rebuilt Jerusalem. The second and eighth visions focus on God's judgment of the nations who had attacked Israel. In the second vision, craftsmen cast down the four horns which represent the nations who "scattered Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem" (Zech 1:19). In the eighth vision, four chariots patrol the earth and put God's Spirit at ease by judging the nation to the north (Babylon, Zech 6:1-8). God did not forget the wrong those nations did, and would judge rightly against them. The sixth and seventh visions focus on God's judgment of hypocrisy and sin. In the sixth vision, a flying scroll that represents God's Law destroys the homes of liars, thieves, and those who swear falsely by God's name (Zech 5:1-4). In the seventh vision, sin is personified as a woman in a basket who is carried to Babylon (Zech 5:5-11). As God's people rebuilt Jerusalem, they needed to remember that sin wasn't just Assyria or Babylon's problem. Rather, God's judgment of sin would include hypocrites within the nation of Israel as well. Sin would be removed from Israel—removed and put where it belongs.

Zechariah's third, fourth, and fifth visions narrate the future victory of God's people as Jerusalem and the priestly ministry prosper. The third vision focuses on the future glory of Jerusalem, as a man measures Jerusalem. Zechariah is told Jerusalem will be a village without walls and that God himself will be her wall of protection and his glory will dwell in her midst (Zech 2:1-5). This vision is a drastic improvement of the reality Israel faced in trying to rebuild Jerusalem after seventy years in exile.

Jerusalem's ultimate future will be very bright. The fourth vision reveals a high priest,



Joshua, receiving clean priestly garments. Not only with the temple be finished, but the high priest will facilitate the removal of Israel's sin (Zech 3:9). This ministry is a prophecy of the Messiah's work, but note that the priestly office is emphasized. Jerusalem in that day will be at peace (Zech 3:10). In the fifth vision Zechariah sees a golden lamp stand and two olive trees feeding it oil. The olive trees stand for two anointed ones, probably Zerubbabel and Jonathan, who will lead God's people. The emphasis of the vision is that God's Spirit guarantees the success of their endeavor, not their strength (Zech 4:6).

The narrated experience of Zechariah anchors his visions to the reality of Israel rebuilding Jerusalem in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. While he isn't as active as Ezekiel or Daniel, Zechariah asks questions at the right time and interacts with his angelic guide. As Jerusalem sleeps during the reconstruction phase, Zechariah sees a Jerusalem that prospers. The message of God prospering Jerusalem should cause the Israelites involved in her rebuilding to be able to sleep easier. Zechariah could testify that Jerusalem's best days were yet to come.

### *Daniel*

The debate over dating Daniel's apocalyptic sections presents a challenge in discussing their original context. Traditionally, Daniel has been dated to the Babylonian exile. The arguments for an exilic milieu for Daniel's composition are the first person reports in the apocalyptic visions, the detailed descriptions in the first six chapters of

Daniel, and the reference to Daniel by Jesus in Matthew 24:15 (cf. Mark 13:14).<sup>39</sup> This viewpoint is the minority opinion among scholars today. Critical scholarship, on the other hand, dates the apocalyptic visions of Daniel to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, during/after the reign of Antiochus IV. They argue that Daniel is pseudonymous, its prophecies are *ex-eventu*, it contains historical inaccuracies, and that the use of Persian and Greek words put the matter beyond doubt.<sup>40</sup> The linguistic argument has been challenged by Archer and others.<sup>41</sup> There are various approaches to resolving the perceived historical problems in the book. The main issue for dating Daniel 7-12 is the interpreter's assumptions regarding future telling prophecy. Of interest for this project is that both contexts are one in which Israel was marginalized; either Israel was in exile in Babylon or under severe oppression by Antiochus IV. The traditional view is preferable given the existence of future telling prophecy. However, I have also included below a discussion of how Daniel's apocalyptic sections provide a narrative for Israel if it was composed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC.

Daniel's apocalyptic visions provide a narrative for the people of Israel by disclosing their future victory in the worldwide kingdom of God. Daniel's four apocalyptic visions are dated precisely, like Ezekiel's. They are all given after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, the first vision dating to 553 BC and the last to

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. Andrew E. Hill, *Daniel*, vol. 8, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Daniel-Malachi* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 23.

<sup>40</sup> S. R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*, 8th ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1909), 508.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Gleason L. Archer Jr., *Daniel*, vol. 7, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985), 20-21.

536 BC. In the time frame of the first two visions, Israel was living in Babylon under Babylonian rule. In the last two visions, Babylon had been replaced by Medo-Persia. The context of regime change is important in seeing how each vision functions for the original audience.

Daniel's first vision communicates a narrative where God's kingdom will replace all earthly kingdoms. In this vision Daniel sees four kingdoms symbolically represented as beasts (Dan 7:1-28). At the heart of the vision, Daniel sees the throne room of God and the presentation of one like a "Son of Man." He is given authority and an eternal kingdom (Dan 7:9-14). The narrative of the vision is explained by Daniel's heavenly guide: earthly kingdoms will replace each other and ultimately be judged by God, who will then set up an eternal kingdom which will be given to the saints of God (7:17-27). God's people will be victorious in that they will be part of his future kingdom. This narrative includes temporary suffering for Israel (Dan 7:21). Even though Israel was subject to Babylon, the first beast, God's kingdom would ultimately become a reality. The narrative leaves room for future suffering, but emphasizes God's sovereignty and the role of the Son of Man in reigning.

Daniel's second vision tells the story of the people of Israel suffering in the aftermath of the Greek kingdom. He sees a ram and a goat which represent Medo-Persia and Greece. The goat grows four horns which correspond to the division of Alexander the Great's kingdom after his death. At this point, one particular ruler will come to power who will oppress God's people, Antiochus IV (Dan 8:24-25). This narrative for Israel's future only contains a brief glimpse of victory, "And he shall even

rise up against the Prince of princes, and he shall be broken—but by no human hand” (Dan 8:25). The vision dates to 551 or 550 BC, the time when Cyrus II asserted the power of the emerging Persian empire.<sup>42</sup> As the political landscape for Israel in exile was changing, the message was clear: hard times are coming. God’s people in exile needed to prepare themselves for future trials.

Daniel’s third vision provides a narrative for Israel in exile where over seventy weeks of years God puts an end to Israel’s sin and brings about righteousness (Dan 9:24). When Daniel receives the vision it was the year 539 or 538 BC (Dan 9:1). This was the year the Persian empire officially displaced the Babylonians. Daniel was praying about the end of the seventy years of exile, asking God to return the people of Israel to their land (Dan 9:16-19). Daniel is interrupted with an answer by the heavenly messenger Gabriel. The answer describes not just seventy years, but seventy weeks of years (490). Israel will rebuild Jerusalem after seven weeks of years. Even though it will also include suffering for God’s people, the seventy weeks of years are framed positively by Gabriel in Dan 9:24.

The point of describing a period of history as an order of weeks is to emphasize God’s sovereignty over that time period. There is considerable debate about the last week of years and the identity of the anointed one in Daniel 9:26, which is beyond the scope of this project.<sup>43</sup> What is relevant is the use of seventy weeks as a way of

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<sup>42</sup> Kaiser, *History*, 427-28.

<sup>43</sup> The issues regarding interpreting this part of Daniel are complex, especially given the lack of a clear starting point for the seventy weeks. There are in general three views regarding the anointed one of Daniel 9:26 and the cessation of sacrifices in 9:27— 1) the critical view takes this as a reference to Antiochus IV, 2) classical dispensationalists take this as a reference to the anti-Christ, 3) others take it as a reference to Jesus. I think the last view has the most merit.

ordering history. Order and organization imply an Organizer. Thus God gives Israel, while in exile under a new power, a narrative in which they rebuild Jerusalem. That fact, however, doesn't mean Israel's future is without trials. Ultimately, the end of the seventy weeks of years concludes with blessing and the destruction of "the one who makes desolate" (Dan 9:27).

Daniel's fourth vision establishes a lengthy narrative of suffering and then victory in the resurrection. This vision was given in 536 BC, one year after Zerubbabel and Joshua would have returned to the land of Israel. Daniel is given a detailed prophecy of the back and forth between the Ptolemy and Seleucid kingdoms resulting in Israel suffering under a wicked last king. This king is identified as Antiochus IV, or as the antichrist. Nevertheless, God's people will be delivered (Dan 12:1). Daniel is told of the resurrection, and how some will be resurrected to life and some to judgment (Dan 12:2-3). God's faithfulness to Israel in sending them back to the land of their forefathers did not mean they would not face challenges and suffering in the future. When that day of suffering came, they would need the reminder that God's narrative for them included ultimate victory in the resurrection.

The narrated experience of Daniel, like Ezekiel and Zechariah, anchors his visions to the reality of Israel in the Babylonian/Persian exile. Daniel is given the visions while he is asleep at home (Dan 7:1), while he was in the capital (Dan 8:2), while he is praying (Dan 9:2), and while he was fasting, standing on the banks of the Tigris river (Dan 10:2-4). He is God's messenger for Israel amidst the rapidly changing geo-political climate. The fantastic visions of Daniel are all related to regime change

and the place of the people of Israel in history. God had not forgotten them, and would not forget them even when they bounced back and forth between kingdoms. Their ultimate hope was God's kingdom, and that mattered to Israelites in Susa, and on the banks of the Tigris river.

### Canonical Apocalypses from the Seleucid Oppression

Daniel is the only canonical apocalyptic text that has been dated to the timeframe of the Seleucid Oppression and Maccabean revolt (164-160 BC).<sup>44</sup> As a reminder, this is a time when Israel was facing the pressures of Hellenization. Antiochus IV turned up the heat on the Jewish people by forcing them to choose between traditional Judaism or a fully Hellenized version. He initiated "a systematic attempt to Hellenize the country by force."<sup>45</sup> Some scholars date the composition of the apocalyptic section of Daniel to the end of 164 BC. This date assumes that Daniel 11:45 describes the death of Antiochus IV incorrectly.<sup>46</sup>

In this view, Daniel's apocalyptic visions were written pseudonymously to promote faith under the oppression of Antiochus IV. They provide a narrative which accounts for the suffering of Israel under the Seleucids, and prophesied their future victory. Like 4 Ezra or 2 Baruch, the Babylonian exile is used by the author of Daniel

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<sup>44</sup> See discussion above.

<sup>45</sup> Kaiser, *History*, 466.

<sup>46</sup> Hill, *Daniel*, 24-25.

to motivate Israel to stay faithful and have hope during the spiritual exile of those stuck in a Hellenized Israel.

Assuming this later date for Daniel changes the significance of the narrated experience of Daniel as the vision recipient. Rather than anchor the visions to the real world of the audience, the narrated experience connects Daniel's visions to Israel's past in Babylon/Persia. The idea would be that Israel has never had it worse than in Babylon, and thus if they could receive a message of hope then, they can have hope under Antiochus IV. Furthermore, since their suffering under Antiochus IV was "prophesied" to Daniel, they should trust God in the midst of it.

While the later composition of Daniel does not best fit the evidence of the book, it still conforms to the pattern of how apocalyptic literature was used to address people in contexts of marginalization and oppression. I include the alternate discussion here because, as Hill states, "a growing number of biblical scholars who might be categorized broadly as conservative or evangelical in persuasion adhere to this view."<sup>47</sup>

### Canonical Apocalypses from the Roman Period

The book of Revelation is unique as it is the only canonical apocalyptic text composed during the Roman period, at a time when Christians were facing increasing persecution. It was most likely written after the destruction of the 2<sup>nd</sup> temple in Jerusalem in AD 70. Most scholars hold that Revelation originated during the reign of Domitian (AD 81-96). Some suggest an earlier date for Revelation—during the reign of

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<sup>47</sup> Hill, *Daniel*, 25.

Nero (AD 54-68). The book of Revelation presupposes at least some persecution for Christians, and John's visions clearly assume the persecution will get worse. Thus, the reigns of Nero and Domitian are the two natural choices. Early Christians assumed systematic persecution of believers during Domitian's reign, but this seems to have been exaggerated.<sup>48</sup> However, Nero's persecution of Christians was limited to Rome, and therefore the point may be moot. Carson and Moo state, "We are confined to assumptions, and the assumption of persecution of Christians in Asia Minor under Nero has no more to be said for it than a similar persecution under Domitian."<sup>49</sup>

The circumstances during the reign of Domitian are a better fit for the assumptions in Revelation. Revelation writes to Christians were under pressure, especially to worship the emperor.<sup>50</sup> This practice was not widespread until Domitian's reign. Christians were not actively sought out for prosecution, but they could and were prosecuted for refusing to worship the emperor.<sup>51</sup> Beale summarizes, "...what emerges from both the early secular and Christian sources is that there is some evidence for a hardening of Roman policy, which became increasingly tolerant toward explicit Christian non participation in the political-religious life of Greco-Roman society."<sup>52</sup> Even those who hold that there was virtually no persecution of Christians during

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<sup>48</sup> Carson and Moo, 709.

<sup>49</sup> Carson and Moo, 709.

<sup>50</sup> Beale, 5.

<sup>51</sup> Beale, 5.

<sup>52</sup> Beale, 9.



Domitian's reign acknowledge that Christians were facing increasing hostility from their communities. A.Y. Collins states, "They were, however, a despised minority and so individual Christians were accused (and thus brought to trial) from time to time by a hostile gentile or Jewish neighbor."<sup>53</sup> In her work *Crisis and Catharsis* she notes that the oppression or marginalization the readers of Revelation faced need not be extensive for the community to feel oppressed. She writes, "*Relative*, not absolute or objective, deprivation is a common precondition of millenarian movements. In other words, the crucial element is not so much whether one is actually oppressed as whether one *feels* oppressed."<sup>54</sup>

Revelation provides a narrative of future victory for Christians who have already started to feel the pressures of persecution, and will need faith to face radically intensifying persecution in the days ahead. The reality for Christians on the ground in Asia Minor at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century varied from place to place. Some faced prosecution for refusal to worship the emperor, others simply faced increasing social pressure to conform to the culture. Gonzalez states, "In Asia Minor, this persecution results in the writing of the book of Revelation, whose author was exiled on the island of Patmos."<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Adela Yarboro Collins, "Reading the Book of Revelation in the Twentieth Century," in *Interpretation* 40, no. 3 (July 1986): 240.

<sup>54</sup> Adela Yarboro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 84.

<sup>55</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 37.

The future victory in the narrative provided by the visions of Revelation focuses on the destruction of the epicenter of sinful culture—Babylon (Rome) and the establishment of God’s kingdom in its place. This narrative is developed with four key components: God’s rule and authority, his judgment of sin and evil, the victory of the saints in the Lamb despite persecution and martyrdom, and the establishment of his kingdom on earth.

The visions of Revelation start in chapters four and five by establishing God’s rule and authority in the heavenly throne room in direct contradiction to the authority of the Roman emperor. God’s authority is the focus. The song of the twenty-four elders says, “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created” (Rev 4:11). Bauckham observes that the flashes of lighting and peals of thunder repeated throughout the book begin in the throne room of God in Revelation 4:5. He says the repetition of this feature throughout the book “serves to anchor the divine judgments of chapters 6-16 in the initial vision of God’s rule in heaven in chapter 4.”<sup>56</sup> Only the Lamb is worthy, and has the authority, to open the seals on the scroll which contain God’s judgments. In chapter five, all creation sings, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever” (Rev 5:13). Rome demanded recognition of the divine authority of the emperor. In Revelation, John witnesses and hears of the absolute authority of God. As Christians in the late 1<sup>st</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (New York: T&T Clark, 2000), 8.

century faced prosecution and persecution from the earthly authorities, they needed to be reminded that God is *the* authority.

The second major contribution of Revelation as it provides a narrative for 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians is the judgment of sin and evil, which was prevalent in Roman culture. In general, the progression in Revelation from seals to trumpets to bowls points emphatically to their conclusion: God's judgment of sin and evil. Bauckham observes that the series of seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls are "sequences progressing toward the final judgment in the seventh of each series."<sup>57</sup> After the seventh bowl is finally poured out, Babylon is destroyed (Rev 16:19). The brief description of Babylon's destruction in Revelation 16:19-21 is expanded in laments and praises in Revelation 17:1-19:5.

In Revelation, Babylon likely stands not merely for one city, but for "the ungodly system."<sup>58</sup> Mounce states, "For John, the allusion would be to Rome as the center of Satanic power and oppression against the fledgling church."<sup>59</sup> Others take Babylon to be Jerusalem.<sup>60</sup> In John's day, Rome was clearly the capital of that system, and the unmistakable end of Revelation reveals that Rome will be judged and destroyed by God. This meant that Christians had a motivation to say no to the materialism, sexual immorality, and idolatry prevalent in Roman culture.

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<sup>57</sup> Bauckham, *Climax*, 10.

<sup>58</sup> Beale, 843.

<sup>59</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 303.

<sup>60</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8-22* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 275.

The judgment of sin and evil is also assumed in the narrative provided in Revelation 12 and 13. In that concise history of the struggle between good and evil, Satan, pictured as a dragon, tries unsuccessfully to destroy the Messiah (Rev 12:1-6). Having been defeated in heavenly battle, Satan is cast to earth and spends the rest of his time and energy raging against the church, those who “hold to the testimony of Jesus” (Rev 12:17). Satan utilizes two beasts to make war on the saints, including killing them (Rev 13:7, 15). This background for the situation of the church sheds light on the persecution 1<sup>st</sup> century believers could have been facing. The narrative of history concludes with God’s final judgment of sin and evil. This includes the defeat of Satan, sin, and death in Revelation 20:7-15.

The narrative envisioned in Revelation for 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians centers on the victory of believers due to their connection to the Lamb, despite the fact that they may suffer and die as martyrs. In the history of good versus evil described in Revelation 12-13 the beasts have free reign to execute Christians. John states, “And they have conquered him [the dragon] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death” (Rev 12:11). He then describes the vision of the army of the Lamb in Revelation 14:1-5. This army consists of those “who follow the Lamb where he goes” (Rev 14:3). That phrase is a veiled *reference to martyrdom*; Jesus went to the cross, and they too were willing to lay down their lives. Note the intentional irony: though they were slain in life, they make up the victorious army of the Lamb. Christians living in Asia Minor in the late 1<sup>st</sup> century AD would face the increasing possibility of martyrdom. The apocalyptic vision of

Revelation encourages them that their death may be in the grand narrative, but paradoxically they are still victorious in the Lamb. Indeed, John states baldly, “Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints” (Rev 13:10). 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians needed to know that persecution was a part of their narrative. In addition to God’s rule and authority and his judgment of sin and evil, the narrative of Revelation reveals the victory of the saints in the Lamb despite persecution and martyrdom.

The narrative provided by the book of Revelation for Christians in the late 1<sup>st</sup> century AD culminates in the future victory for the people of God as God sets up his kingdom on earth. In a remarkable reversal, the great harlot Babylon is replaced by the pure bride of the church (Rev 19:6-10), and Babylon is replaced by the heavenly Jerusalem (Rev 21:2). What is most amazing about this future victory is that God brings his kingdom from heaven to earth. What began with a vision of the heavenly throne room, concludes with God residing on the new/renewed earth with his people: “And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (Rev 21:22). The Roman empire will be no more. No earthly king or kingdom will persecute followers of the Lamb. Instead, the city of God will come to earth and his kingdom will be established eternally. The transcendent crashes into the temporal. 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians could look forward to a greater city and empire than even Rome. Thus, Revelation provides a narrative of future victory for the people of God by revealing God’s rule and authority, his judgment of sin and evil, the victory of the saints in the Lamb despite persecution and martyrdom, and the establishment of God's

kingdom on earth. That narrated is communicated through the narrated experience of John, the vision recipient.

The narrated experience of John anchors Revelation to the potential reality of persecution for late 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians.<sup>61</sup> John is the ideal prophetic messenger because of his circumstances. According to Revelation 1:9 John was exiled on the island of Patmos in the Aegean sea. He describes his exile as διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ. The preposition διὰ used with the accusative case indicates cause.<sup>62</sup> He lists two causes for his exile: the word of God and the witness about Jesus. As Mounce says, “Apparently the Asian authorities had interpreted his preaching as seditious and removed him from the mainland in an attempt to inhibit the growth of the early church.”<sup>63</sup> This is significant because so much of Revelation deals with persecution. John was taken from Patmos to heaven and then back to earth. The visions of heaven in Revelation are relevant to John on Patmos, as well as to the average Christian in Asia minor. He was living through persecution, but his experience of the visions in Revelation were a reminder to remain faithful in spite of the attacks of Satan and his beasts. Babylon would fall, and the new Jerusalem will come.

We have seen how canonical apocalyptic literature provides a narrative for its original audience through a visionary representation of the future victory of God’s people, anchored by the narrated experience of the vision recipient. The question now

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<sup>61</sup> This may be the apostle John, but whether it is or not does not change the importance of his circumstances when he received the visions he records.

<sup>62</sup> Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 369.

<sup>63</sup> Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 55.

is how do canonical apocalyptic texts function for readers in a postmodern context.

What do dragons and flying scrolls have to do with people today?

### **Application to Postmodern Culture**

As the original recipients of canonical apocalyptic texts were primarily believers, these texts are primarily applicable to postmodern believers. This does not mean that the postmodern unbeliever cannot be impacted by them, it simply acknowledges that the message of these texts is most relevant to those who already seeking to walk by faith. Although postmodern believers haven't lost their country or temple, they are marginalized in that they live in a context where belief in God is increasingly rare. Postmodern society is a secular society in that it is a society "where belief in God... is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace."<sup>64</sup> Taylor is right, our age is a secular age. Postmodern Christians breathe secular air, and increasingly find themselves in the minority. Like the Babylonian city of Uruk that found itself out of favor, or Israelites living in exile in Babylon, Christians in postmodern are marginalized.

Canonical apocalyptic literature functions for believers in postmodern culture in the same ways that it did for its original audience: it provides a narrative for disenfranchised people through a visionary representation of the future victory of the people of God, anchored by the narrated experience of the vision recipient.

Postmoderns who become Christians bring postmodern assumptions with them. When

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<sup>64</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press: 2007), 3.

they embrace faith in Christ, they embrace a meta-narrative, but they might not know it. As Christians, they will not only face garden variety trials in life, but they will also face varying degrees of persecution. The default cultural rejection of any meta-narrative leaves them without recourse in times of trial. I will examine how canonical apocalyptic literature provides the narrative for postmoderns and how the narrative framework of apocalyptic texts serves as an anchor to the real postmodern world.

### The End of the Story

Canonical apocalyptic literature provides a narrative for postmodern believers through the visionary representation of their future victory as the people of God. The postmodern assumption is there is no meta-narrative, but biblical apocalyptic texts assume there is a grand narrative for the universe and offer a sneak peak at the end.<sup>65</sup> The narrative of future victory serves to provide hope for the marginalized people of God in three key elements: the judgment of the wicked and destruction of Godless culture, the vindication of believers, and the establishment of God's kingdom on earth. Before looking at each of those in turn, it is important to note two ways by which the narrative of canonical apocalyptic texts may apply to believers in a postmodern context.

The narrative in canonical apocalyptic texts may have direct or indirect application to postmodern believers. Not every apocalyptic text describes the future victory of all believers, but many do. For example, the vision of the four chariots in Zechariah 6:1-8 symbolically represents God using Persia to judge Babylon for

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<sup>65</sup> This point assumes the reality of future telling prophecy, as developed in chapter 2.



destroying Israel. That event had already happened, even for Israelites reading Zechariah in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. Nonetheless, Israel could take hope because the Spirit of God was at rest due to his dealing with the sin of Babylon. The application to postmodern believers in this case is indirect: they can also take hope, knowing that God will not rest until he puts an end to sin and evil. In the same way, Daniel's vision in Daniel 10:1-12:13 includes a detailed prophecy of Israel's suffering under the Seleucids. That time period has come and gone, yet the narrative of the text indirectly applies to postmodern believers: God is sovereign over earthly kingdoms and faithful through trials. At the end of that vision, however, Daniel is told of the resurrection, which is still future for all believers and directly applicable to the lives of postmodern believers (Dan 12:2-3). They will personally experience the resurrection, and therefore the narrative of that canonical apocalyptic text directly applies to their lives.

Interpretive differences about particular visions may change whether the narrative of a text applies to a postmodern context directly or indirectly. For example, if the two witnesses of Revelation 11:1-13 are understood to be two literal witnesses during the tribulation, then a postmodern believer would indirectly apply the narrative: God is faithful to ensure his witness goes out to all the earth. However, if the two witnesses are interpreted as symbolically standing for the church, the application of the narrative is direct: God calls the church to stand and witness regardless of the persecution we may face.

The three key elements of the narrative of future victory found in canonical apocalyptic texts provide hope for the marginalized people of God, and each deals with

problems resulting from the postmodern rejection of meta-narrative. First, the judgment of the wicked and destruction of Godless culture provides a narrative for dealing with evil in a postmodern context. Second, the vindication of believers provides a narrative for those marginalized by societies. Finally, the the establishment of God's kingdom on earth provides a narrative for the postmodern longing for community.

### *The Judgment of the Wicked and the Problem of Evil*

The judgment of evil and the destruction of Godless culture in the narrative provided by canonical apocalyptic texts answers the postmodern dilemma regarding morality. Without a meta-narrative (and Narrator) for the universe, postmodern culture has increasingly struggled to define right and wrong. This is a side effect of pluralism. Carson states, "In the moral realm, there is very little consensus left in Western countries over the proper basis of moral behavior... Personal and social ethics have been removed from the realms of truth and of structure of thought; they have not only been relativized, but they have been democratized and trivialized."<sup>66</sup> People still assert there is a right and wrong, but adjudicating between the two is increasingly difficult and often perceived to be unnecessary.

In stark contrast to this amorality, canonical apocalyptic texts are unambiguous regarding the existence of evil and God's commitment to deal with it. Whether it is the four chariots of Zechariah 6 patrolling the earth, imposing God's justice, or the seven bowls of God's wrath poured out in Revelation, God will deal with evil. The black and

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<sup>66</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 23, Kindle.

white nature of the depiction of evil in canonical apocalyptic texts contrasts with the often grey realities of postmodern life. The narrative of God judging evil reminds the postmodern reader that while determining right and wrong may be difficult for them, it is not with God. Furthermore, they can take comfort that if they do not find justice in this life, God will judge rightly at the end of history's narrative. In this regard, Revelation 20:11-15 is crucial. God sits on a great white throne and judges all of humanity.

The canonical apocalyptic narrative of the destruction of Godless culture is a theme in the visions of Daniel and Revelation that also addresses the postmodern moral dilemma. In Daniel 7, the four beasts/kingdoms will ultimately be judged by God and replaced by his kingdom. In Revelation 17 and 18, John describes the destruction of Babylon, who is depicted as the great harlot who led the entire earth in idolatry and immorality. Postmoderns often observe how much the "system" is broken. The Occupy Wall Street movement illustrates the popularity of this viewpoint. The protestors were angry, but about what? David Mills wrote that this anger "gets you nowhere. It offers no critique of, no challenge nor any alternative to the vague abstract thing at which you are angry."<sup>67</sup> The narrative of Revelation 17-18 affirms that the system is broken, but it also adds the specific reason why: sin.<sup>68</sup> The idolatry of the system needs to be dealt

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<sup>67</sup> David Mills, "Occupy Wall Street's Empty Anger," *First Things*, accessed February 3, 2015, <http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2011/10/occupy-wall-streets-empty-anger>.

<sup>68</sup> It is ironic that one of the main concerns in Revelation 18 is the materialism associated with Godless culture. The Occupy Wall Street ideal was to redistribute the wealth of Wall Street, not to be cured of materialism.

with, and in the vision, God will deal with it by destroying Babylon. God will not only deal with individual sinners, but with the entire sinful system.

### *The Vindication of Believers and the Issue of Marginalization*

The second key element of the narrative of future victory found in canonical apocalyptic texts, the vindication of believers, addresses the postmodern concern with marginalization. When there is no meta-narrative, the lives of individuals lose significance. Wells writes, “Postmoderns live on the surface, not in the depths, and theirs is a despair to be tossed off lightly and which might even be alleviated by nothing more than a sitcom.”<sup>69</sup> Christians not only face this generic loss of meaning typical of postmodern culture, but they also face further marginalization because of the hostility of postmodern culture to biblical Christianity. The narrative of future victory in canonical apocalyptic literature addresses two kinds of marginalization: the marginalization of the oppressed, and the marginalization of Christians.

First, the narrative of future victory in canonical apocalyptic texts includes God’s concern for victims of abuse. In the description of the judgment of Babylon, which stands for godless culture *en toto*, an angel approves of God’s judgment for Babylon because “in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints, *and of all who have been slain on the earth*” (Rev 18:24). The last line is important, because it explains that God’s anger with Godless culture is not only because of the killing of Christians, but also because of the unjust killing of anyone for the purpose of Babylon’s

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<sup>69</sup> David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 177.

success. As Bauckham states, “God’s judgment of Rome is also attributed to her slaughter of the innocent in general.”<sup>70</sup> The future victory of God’s people includes righting the wrongs of abuse.

Second, the narrative of future victory in canonical apocalyptic texts acknowledges the marginalization of believers, specifically in the extremes of persecution.<sup>71</sup> In the Revelation 6:9-10 the souls of martyred saints cry out “how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” In other words, “don’t our lives and deaths matter?” In many ways, the seven seals, trumpets, and bowls are God’s answer to that prayer. This is made explicit in Revelation 19:2 where a great multitude praises God because he “has avenged on her [Babylon] the blood of his servants.” The narrative affirms that believers will be marginalized, but only for a time.

Another dramatic display of the reversal of fortune for marginalized Christians is the army of the Lamb in Revelation 14:1-4. Though slain in life, they paradoxically stand victorious with the Lamb. The world cannot rob believers of significance, because significance is found in their connection to the Lamb. Postmodern believers may face economic and social persecution. They can be overlooked for promotions, or shunned in society. What Jones and Sumney state regarding the original audience of apocalyptic texts is also true of postmodern believers, “They need a word of hope about

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<sup>70</sup> Bauckham, *Climax*, 350.

<sup>71</sup> Marginalization may be the most mild expression of persecution—if you are a Christian, you may not be taken seriously.

the victory of God and about their participation in that victory.”<sup>72</sup> Should they suffer the end of a martyr, they will not be forgotten by God. This means that God will not forget them no matter what kind of marginalization they suffer.

### *The Establishment of God's Kingdom on Earth*

The third key element of the narrative of future victory found in canonical apocalyptic texts, the establishment of God's kingdom on earth, addresses the postmodern desire for community. Grenz and Franke summarize the postmodern stress on community in contrast to the modern stress on individualism: "...the new communitarians see as the fundamental shortcoming of radical individualism its disregard for the social dimension of life and for the importance of that dimension in the shaping of the self.”<sup>73</sup> Postmodern culture, although fragmented in many ways, values community. They further describe this community focus: "the communal tradition holds to the primacy of the group, elevates the importance of relationships for personal existence, and suggests that interaction among people takes on meaning only in the social context in which it occurs.”<sup>74</sup> The postmodern pursuit of community has even had a technological dimension. Social networks such as Facebook or Twitter, with their relationships based on "friends" and "followers," offer a sense of community without geographical boundaries.

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<sup>72</sup> Jones and Sumney, 106.

<sup>73</sup> Stanley Grenz and John Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 209.

<sup>74</sup> Grenz and Franke, 208.

The kingdom of God in the narrative provided by canonical apocalyptic texts points post moderns to the ideal community. The kingdom of God has both an already and not yet relevance for postmoderns. In canonical apocalyptic texts the not yet of the kingdom of God motivates readers to live out the already aspect of the kingdom of God. This is one apocalyptic prophecy that believers can taste ahead of time. When the future realities of God's kingdom are revealed, that vision breaks into current experience. Note the beautiful realities of the future of God's kingdom in the following examples. In Daniel 7:18 believers have a vested interest in the kingdom, "But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, forever, and ever." God's kingdom provides protection as depicted by the divine walls of fire in Zechariah 2:5. The earth itself will be renewed, as seen in the renewal of the Judean wilderness and the Dead Sea by a new river flowing from the temple in Ezekiel 47:8-12 and the vision of the new heaven and earth in Revelation 21:1. The kingdom of God will have no sin, pain, or mourning as described in Revelation 21:4. The saints will dwell together with God without any barrier as depicted in Revelation 21:3 and Zechariah 2:6. The believer in a postmodern context gets a glimpse of their glorious future victory in the perfect community, the kingdom of God. As Grenz and Franke state, "...while agreeing with the modern narrative that history is going somewhere, the biblical story denies that this 'somewhere' is a humanly devised utopia. Rather, history's goal is nothing less than the realization of God's purposes for creation."<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Grenz and Franke, 261.

In light of those glorious “not yet” of the kingdom of God, post modern believers are inspired to live for God’s kingdom in the present. This is the already aspect. As believers function in community together, valuing God’s purposes above all else, they foreshadow the coming worldwide kingdom of God. Put another way, the rhetorical strategy of displaying the kingdom of God in its shocking beauty is meant to change our beliefs and actions in the here and now regarding that kingdom.

### Narrative Framework

Canonical apocalyptic texts provide a narrative of future victory through the narrated experience of the vision recipient. That narrated experience tethers the transcendent world of the vision to the temporal or material world of the audience. The narrator’s experience on his vision journey reminds the reader that the vision isn’t just a fairy tale, but that it has connection to the real world. This function is key for applying canonical apocalyptic literature in a postmodern context, because postmodernism largely rejects the reality of the transcendent.

The rejection of transcendence is another way of saying that postmodern culture is exclusively committed to a material view of the universe. Meaning has been removed from the transcendent/non-material world. Smith, summarizing Taylor, says that today people “are no longer bothered by ‘the God question’ as a question because they are devotees of ‘exclusive humanism’—a way of being-in-the-world that offers significance without transcendence. They don’t feel like anything is missing.”<sup>76</sup> The

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<sup>76</sup> James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014), loc. 46, Kindle. Emphasis his.



reality of the connection between the transcendent world and the temporal world addresses two major issues in postmodern culture: the problem of evil in the world and a lack of meaning and hope.

### *Evil as a Transcendent Problem*

The tether between the transcendent world and temporal world created by the narrated experience of the vision recipient in canonical apocalyptic literature offers a definitive answer to the problem of evil in the world. Recall the question of Ezra to God in 4 Ezra 8:14, “If then you suddenly and quickly destroy him who with so great labor was fashioned by your command, to what purpose was he made?” This question sounds very much at home in a postmodern culture that views theological answers to suffering and evil unconvincing. In Revelation 12-13 John is given a vision that provides an explanation for the existence of evil and suffering. Satan is depicted as a great red dragon who has failed to thwart the Messiah’s work and has been defeated by the archangel Michael. He is cast down to earth and since then has been raging against the church through his two beasts. This symbolic narrative explains why Christians suffer—why John was exiled on Patmos (Rev 1:9) or why Antipas from Pergamum was executed (Rev 2:13). The apocalyptic vision assumes the reality of a connection between the transcendent world where good angels battle evil angels and the temporal world where Christians are persecuted. Satan is real, and he is at work actively seeking to destroy the church. When postmodern believers see evil in their world, rather than despair, they can point to an ultimate source in the transcendent world.

Another example of the tether between the transcendent world and temporal world created by the narrated experience of the vision recipient offering a clear answer to the problem of evil in the world is found in Ezekiel's vision of the judgment of Jerusalem in Ezekiel 8:1-11:12. Recall that at the time of this vision Ezekiel was living in exile in Babylon prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. Nothing could be more evil in the eyes of the Jewish people than the burning of the temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem. On Ezekiel's vision journey to Jerusalem from his home in Babylon he sees that it is the sin of Israel that caused the need for God's judgment via Babylon (Ezek 11:5-12). In other words, the spiritual reality of the sin of Israelites living in Babylon at that moment would have physical consequences, including the destruction of Jerusalem. In fact, while Ezekiel had this vision, one of the elders of Judah dropped dead at Ezekiel's home in Babylon, presumably due to his sin (Ezek 11:13). The narrated experience of the vision recipient reveals that evil in the real world has an explanation that goes beyond the material. Postmodern believers are rarely privy to such clear connections as those made in Ezekiel's vision, and conceptually it is very difficult for postmoderns to grasp. Postmoderns suffer from a casual attitude toward sin because of the cultural assumption of religious pluralism. Ezekiel's narrated experience demonstrates that sin is a big deal to God, and it has real life implications. Therefore, the postmodern believer should not discount the significance of sin and its effects.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> See pages 195-96 in chapter five on the need to do more than just explain canonical apocalyptic texts.

### *Meaning & Hope as a Transcendent Reality*

The tether between the transcendent world and temporal world created by the narrated experience of the vision recipient in canonical apocalyptic literature also offers meaning and hope to the postmodern world. The loss of meaning and hope is a direct consequence of the rejection of meta-narrative. In some ways, postmoderns have simply refocused the search for meaning. Smith says, “Divested of the transcendent, this world is invested with ultimacy and meaning in ways that couldn’t have been imagined before.”<sup>78</sup> His point is that the postmodern search for meaning is limited to the temporal world. Given the postmodern rejection of the transcendent, people have infused the material world with meaning. One example of this would be materialism or consumerism. Wells directly connects consumerism with the search for meaning, “What was once just about buying goods has become a way of producing private, fleeting moments of meaning which compensate for the many other losses in postmodern life.”<sup>79</sup> In essence, when someone buys a new phone or car, they are finding little moments of significance.

The narrated experience of the vision recipient offers meaning and hope to postmodern readers precisely in that the narrator presents his experience as a real occurrence in time and space. From Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and John’s perspectives, the transcendent is real because they experienced it. Their experience was meant to be shared, so that the meaning and hope that comes from the narrative of

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<sup>78</sup> Smith, 48, Kindle.

<sup>79</sup> Wells, *Pow’rs*, 192-93.

future victory they received can provide meaning and hope for others. People sitting in exile in Babylon, or in a cell in Asia Minor needed to know that God's grand story is a comedy, not a tragedy.

This meaning and hope looks forward temporally and teleologically.

Temporally, it is a future hope that is yet to be fully realized. The resurrection and culmination of salvation have not yet occurred. Teleologically, its purpose is yet to be achieved. God's glory will be manifested in the judgment of sin, redemption of the church, and renewal of creation. As such, this hope is not generic, but particular. Grenz and Franke state, "Biblical hope is always directed toward, anticipates, and draws its life from a particular vision of the future. And the specific future that forms the object of biblical hope is not presented as a possibility, but as a certainty."<sup>80</sup>

They go on, however, to disparage a hope based on "futurist eschatologies."<sup>81</sup> On the one hand, they rightly criticize an anthropocentric view of eschatology. The meta-narrative is what God is doing with history through Jesus Christ. However, the future victory displayed in canonical apocalyptic texts must become a temporal reality in order for the message to work.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I explored how canonical apocalyptic literature restores the lost meta-narrative in postmodern culture by providing a visionary representation of future

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<sup>80</sup> Grenz and Franke, 249.

<sup>81</sup> Grenz and Franke, 250.

victory for the people of God anchored in the narrated experience of the vision recipient. I analyzed the narrative providing function of samples of non-canonical apocalyptic literature in its original context. I then examined how canonical apocalyptic literature functions in the same way as the non-canonical examples for its original audience, noting the key differences between canonical and non-canonical apocalyptic texts. Finally, I explored how canonical apocalyptic literature, inspired by God, supplies a meta-narrative for post modern culture.

In order to test my thesis, I conducted two focus group discussion sessions utilizing the same focus group. I asked the same group of people the same set of questions on two occasions. The first session was before a series of sermons on Revelation 12-13, and the second session was after the sermon series. The discussion questions were designed to generate discussion on applying Revelation 12-13 to the lives of those in the group.

In chapter five I will consider the outcome of my project and draw conclusions about the challenges of applying canonical apocalyptic texts in post modern culture. I will also relate how these observations should impact the manner in which we preach on apocalyptic texts and make application to post modern audiences.

From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present. The eschatological is not one element of Christianity, but it is the medium of Christian faith as such, the key in which everything in it is set, the glow that suffuses everything here in the dawn of an expected new day.

—Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*

## CHAPTER FIVE

### OUTCOMES

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter I will make observations from two focus group discussions on applying a specific canonical apocalyptic text to postmodern life and draw conclusions about the challenges of applying canonical apocalyptic texts in post modern culture. I will then relate how these observations should impact the manner in which we preach apocalyptic texts to post modern audiences.

#### **Focus Group Observations**

In order to test my thesis that canonical apocalyptic literature restores the lost meta-narrative in postmodern culture by providing a visionary representation of future victory for the people of God anchored in the narrated experience of the vision recipient, I asked a focus group of people from my congregation the same set of questions on two occasions. The first session was before a series of sermons on Revelation 12-13, and the second session was after the sermon series. The discussion questions were designed to generate discussion on applying Revelation 12-13 to the

lives of those in the group. I chose Revelation 12-13 because it is the dramatic presentation of the dragon, Satan, being cast from heaven to earth and subsequently utilizing two beasts to try and destroy the church. I wanted to see how the people in the group wrestled with the highly symbolic language, and how they made application of the text. I was listening for how the group dealt with the problem of parataxis and the rejection of meta-narrative in light of this specific canonical apocalyptic passage.

The sermon series on Revelation 12-13 had three parts. The first message focused on Revelation 12:1-17. The big idea of the message was “Our victory over Satan by the Lamb means his rage is in vain.” In this sermon I presented the problem of suffering given a paratactic worldview: The second message was on Revelation 13:1-10. The big idea of the message was, “Christians must be ready in trials to endure and believe.” In this sermon I focused on the reality of the transcendent. Satan is real, and is attacking the church. The passage makes a direct connection between the transcendent world and temporal world. The third message was on Revelation 13:11-18. The big idea of the message was, “Worship of the true Lamb is the antidote for false worship, and it stands out.” In this sermon I focused on the worship problem as displayed in text. We will either worship the beast or the Lamb, but it isn’t always easy to see worship of the beast for what it is. The significance here for postmodern hearers is realizing that the mundane aspects of our lives are infused with theological importance. While a paratactic worldview leads us to assume there is no significance to many or all of our choices, this text asserts the exact opposite. Because there is a narrative, it matters if we worship the beast or the Lamb.

I first asked the focus group, “In general, what practical relevance do you glean from Revelation 12-13?” The answers before the sermon series were at first pessimistic about finding relevance. One participant answered, “Nothing.” Many were immediately distracted by issues of eschatological schemes—when would/did these events happen? One person said the text was “kind of reassuring,” but didn’t have much to say about why. After a few minutes, one participant keyed in on the idea of being aware of Satanic schemes.

After the sermon series on Revelation 12-13, the focus group answered the question about the general relevance of Revelation 12-13 with more certainty and with more focus on God’s sovereignty. The text deals explicitly with Christians suffering at the hands of the beast, and this topic was the focus of the group’s answers. One person said, “As Christians we will go through trials; [we need] to be as prepared as we can.” Another person said, “God isn’t absent from all of this.” Several people observed that God would allow atrocities like martyrdom, and confessed that it was hard to accept that fact. One participant expressed their struggle with God’s choices. They said, “If I couldn’t stand to watch that happen, how could he?” They went on to say the answer was that God was not like them. One person observed, “I can deal with good things happening to bad people, but it’s bad things happening to good people that I struggle with.” Everyone in the group seemed to better appreciate the aggressive stance of Satan against Christians, although he may used subtle methods. As one participant said, “He’s attacking us. It’s not like Genghis Kahn coming at us, it’s like Betty Crocker coming at us.”



The second question for the group was, “What aspects of this passage do you find unsettling or encouraging?” The answers to this question didn’t change much from before to after the sermon series. Participants found God’s sovereignty and mercy comforting. One person noted that “God is sovereign; he is definitely in control.” The group found the description of Satan’s rage to be unsettling. One person summarized this by saying, “Satan has the audacity to challenge [God]... That’s the cause of a lot of our troubles today.”

The third question was, “In what ways does this passage impact your interpretation of the significance of suffering and evil in your life?” Before the sermon series, the answers were generic. One participant said, “[God] puts boundaries on [suffering/evil]. It’s not permanent... No matter how bad it gets... it’s not permanent.” Another said, “Ultimately we know the dragon has been defeated.” After the sermon series, however, the answers were more specific and focused on preparing to go through trials and persecution. One participant admitted that prior to this study they weren’t prepared for suffering trials. They said the series “shifted my focus more on God’s provision and him seeing us through trials.” Another participant said, “Sometimes it’s easy to forget there’s war going on... and there are spiritual forces fighting for us.” Many connected persecution today to Satan. As one participant put it, “We’re living in the history of Satan’s childish rage.”

The fourth question was, “How does this passage contribute to the big story of what God is doing in all of history?” Before the sermon series, participants struggled to articulate answers to this question. Several simply concluded, “We win.” One person

focused on the postmodern struggle with suffering and evil. They said, “A lot of non-Christians ask the same questions.” They told a story about their Roman Catholic neighbor, who had asked them about why God allows suffering. That participant observed, “This plan doesn’t jive with the normal person.”

After the sermon series the participants still struggled to answer the question of the big story in all of history. One person answered, “Bad things happen to the saints... We’re not here for ourselves.” Several participants tied their answer to worship. The entire group struggled to relate the story in Revelation 12-13 to an overall plan of God for history. One participant latched onto God’s sovereignty, but generically. They said, “All the evil in the world—God turns it around for his glory.”

The final question for the group was, “How should this passage change our theology and our behavior?” Participants had much more to say about this question before the sermon series than after. I think this was because it was the last question, and they had already mentioned many changes in theology and behavior in previous answers. They talked about having a closer relationship to God during trials, and enduring Satan’s rage. Several noted that this passage should impact how we interpret current events. Interestingly, two participants made the same point but with opposite applications. One said they didn’t need to bother watching the news anymore because they were confident in God’s sovereignty. Another said they could watch the news without anxiety because of God’s sovereignty. One person said regarding persecution, “We shouldn’t be surprised.” Another connected this passage to the current event of ISIS beheading Christians in Syria and Iraq. They said the martyred Christians “love

Christ so much they would give up their lives." The one addition the group did make after the sermon series to their answers to this question was the concept of urgency—they now viewed the truths of Revelation 12-13 as immediately relevant and needed to prepare themselves and future generations for suffering persecution.

### **The Postmodern Challenge**

The above focus group discussions brought to light two major challenges in applying canonical apocalyptic literature to postmodern culture. First, postmodern Christians find it extremely difficult to see the practical relevance of canonical apocalyptic literature. Second, the rejection of meta-narrative in postmodern culture is deeply rooted in postmodern Christians. While these two challenges were not previously unknown, they present unique problems for preaching apocalyptic literature in a postmodern context.

#### **The Challenge of the Meta-narrative**

The first major challenge in applying canonical apocalyptic literature to postmodern culture is the deeply ingrained rejection of meta-narrative in postmodern Christians. This was evident in the focus group discussion of the question regarding how Revelation 12-13 contributed to the big story of what God is doing in all of history. The focus group struggled to articulate an answer to this question. As a follow up question I asked them to explain the “big story” of the universe. They offered a general scheme of salvation, but it too was a challenge for the entire group. They were not able

to articulate that this text explained why there is a need for salvation and redemption and just cause for the judgment of sin and evil in the last days. As I reflected on their difficulty in answering, I realized that I was witnessing the fruits of postmodernism. Postmodern Christians don't think in terms of a meta-narrative for the universe. This reality has practical implications for postmodern Christians and reveals the need for proclaiming God's truth found in canonical apocalyptic texts.

The focus group demonstrated how rejection of meta-narrative has practical implications for postmodern Christians. Their struggle to place their trials in the big picture revealed their paratactic worldview. They had been taught that God was sovereign, but when they considered suffering and evil they struggled to believe it. As one respondent stated candidly, "I can deal with good things happening to bad people, but it's bad things happening to good people that I struggle with." Another participant described a neighbor and said, "This plan doesn't jive with the normal person." I couldn't help but think that on a practical level that statement probably applies to most postmodern Christians.

This partial rejection of meta-narrative illustrates the desperate need for the preaching of canonical apocalyptic texts. The before and after answers of the focus group made this need clear. First, after the sermon series on Revelation 12-13, the group was more confident in asserting God's sovereignty over their lives, especially regarding trials. One person said, "All the evil in the world—God turns it around for his glory."

Second, after the sermon series the focus group identified the urgent need to both understand the message of canonical apocalyptic literature and communicate it to others. This represented a remarkable change from the practical negligence of canonical apocalyptic literature apparent before the sermon series. One person said they shouldn't be shy about telling people the truths found in the apocalyptic parts of the people, "because they need to hear it." After the sermon series, the group not only appreciated the relevance of canonical apocalyptic texts for themselves, but they also believed the truths found in those texts to be relevant for others.

Third, after the sermon series, the focus group articulated that Satan was the primary source of evil and suffering for the church. This truth has two important implications: Satan's rage against the church is not outside of God's sovereignty and God will ultimately judge Satan for his rage against the church. As one participant summarized, "We're living in the history of Satan's childish rage." The group used the concepts of God's reign and justice—major themes in canonical apocalyptic literature—to explain suffering and evil in their lives. One participant stated, "[God] puts boundaries on [suffering/evil]. It's not permanent... No matter how bad it gets... it's not permanent." Another said, "Ultimately we know the dragon has been defeated."

### *I Don't Believe in Dragons*

The second major challenge in applying canonical apocalyptic literature in a postmodern context is postmodern Christians struggle to see the relevance of canonical apocalyptic literature. One particular answer to the first question in the focus group

illustrated this problem: what practical relevance is there to glean from Revelation 12-13? “Nothing.” I think this is a common first response when postmodern Christians think about the apocalyptic parts of the Bible: they just aren’t relevant to them. There are two primary reasons postmodern Christians struggle to see the relevance of canonical apocalyptic literature. First, the genre of apocalyptic literature is foreign to the postmodern world. Second, postmodern Christians and preachers avoid studying eschatology.

There are three potential explanations for why apocalyptic literature is so foreign to postmodern Christians. First, the strangeness of apocalyptic literature to postmoderns is a function of time and space from the ancient world. The visionary journeys of apocalyptic texts are far removed from the world of postmodern people. Second, the anti-supernaturalism of modernism lingers in postmodern assumptions. The idea of prophets and seers is not common in Western culture today, so the apocalyptic sections of the Bible are even more unusual to the postmodern reader. Third, apocalyptic literature is odd to postmoderns because of unfamiliarity with the Bible. As Bible literacy continues to fall in Western culture, once-familiar images from Ezekiel and Zechariah become unknown and bizarre.

The second reason postmodern Christians do not see canonical apocalyptic texts as relevant is the propensity of laypeople and preachers alike to avoid eschatology. This hesitancy to wade into apocalyptic waters is partially a result of postmodern epistemology. Postmodern epistemology is skeptical of any universal truth claims and claims of supernatural revelation. This skepticism causes preachers and congregants

alike to avoid controversial parts of the Bible—who could ever know with certainty how they apply to our lives? In addition to the epistemological problem, people have been confused by complicated eschatological schemes, and as such are inclined to avoid the matter altogether. This pendulum swing away from eschatology could also be the result of fundamentalism's over-emphasis on it during the 20th century.

### **Application to Preaching**

Canonical apocalyptic literature presents such a unique challenge to preachers in post modern contexts that we must do more than just explain these texts. Postmodern believers struggle to grasp how these parts of the Bible function. Explanation may be interesting, but it isn't enough. The preacher needs to help the audience feel the rhetorical effect of the texts. In the mind of the postmodern, these passages need to go from being strange and unusual to being powerful and arresting. This means preachers need to show and persuade as much as they explain.<sup>1</sup> In a ministry context, this means utilizing other resources such as visual aids, discussion groups, songs and videos to help.

The two major challenges in applying canonical apocalyptic literature to postmodern culture, that the rejection of meta-narrative in postmodern culture is deeply rooted in postmodern Christians and that postmodern Christians find it extremely difficult to see the practical relevance of canonical apocalyptic literature, call for two

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Jeffrey Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2007), 178-99. To my knowledge, this is the only resource that deals explicitly with recreating the rhetorical effect of apocalyptic texts in sermons.

corresponding responses in preaching canonical apocalyptic literature. First, because the rejection of meta-narrative is deeply rooted in postmodern Christians, preachers need to work hard to clearly articulate the meta-narrative of the Bible. That narrative has four parts: creation, sin, redemption, and renewal.<sup>2</sup> Second, because postmodern Christians find it extremely difficult to see the practical relevance of canonical apocalyptic literature, preachers need to make relevant application clear for postmodern listeners.

### Provide the Narrative

Post modern preachers must clearly articulate the meta-narrative of the Bible when preaching canonical apocalyptic texts. In order to do this, the postmodern preacher needs to have a clear grasp of the meta-narrative for history revealed in the Bible, and how their particular canonical apocalyptic text fits into that narrative. The danger of missing the forest for the trees is high when preaching the apocalyptic texts in the Bible. Too much focus on eschatological schemes can result in preachers missing *the* eschatological scheme.

Providing the narrative means explaining the meta-narrative of the Bible and identifying how the canonical apocalyptic text in question contributes to that narrative.

For example, when preaching from Revelation 12-13, the preacher needs to clarify that

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<sup>2</sup> There are many ways to summarize the Biblical meta-narrative. I would summarize it as follows. After God created the world, human kind chose to disobey God, thus introducing the problem of sin. Jesus is the promised redeemer and Son of God who died to pay the penalty for sin and conquered sin and death by resurrection. Jesus will one day return to redeem those who have put their faith in him and judge sin and evil. At that time all of humanity will be resurrected and creation will be renewed.



the dragon's rage against the woman's descendants describes the suffering of the church at the hands of Satan. Furthermore, the preacher needs to remind the audience that the dragon will not succeed, as revealed later in Revelation.

Preachers in a postmodern context not only need to have a clear grasp of the meta-narrative of the Bible, they must also must take into account the eschatological baggage of their congregation. Over the course of this project I preached sermon series through Zechariah, Daniel, and Revelation. As I did so, I was amazed that many questions the congregation had about eschatology were not addressed in the apocalyptic texts of the Bible. For example, people in my ministry context were very curious about the timing of "the rapture," the time when believers will meet Jesus in the air as described in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, "Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord." This is a good question, but it is not explicitly addressed in canonical apocalyptic literature. There are references to the resurrection, but the event Paul describes is not described in detail. Carefully developed theologies will have theories as to where this event fits in the various canonical apocalyptic texts. However, such topics should not dominate sermons on canonical apocalyptic texts because they skew the focus of the message. Should a sermon be about "the rapture" if the text is not? Preachers must be aware of the pressing questions of their congregation, while seeking to redirect their attention to the Word of God.

## Make Relevance Clear

Postmodern preachers need to make the meta-narrative of apocalyptic texts clear, and they also need to make relevant application clear for postmodern listeners. The deeply rooted rejection of meta-narrative in postmodern culture lurks in Christians and non-Christians alike, albeit in differing degrees. Many listeners will not only believe that canonical apocalyptic literature is not relevant to them, they also will be used to interpreting their lives without reference to the meta-narrative. Because of the problem of parataxis, people will interpret bad traffic, sickness, car accidents, economic crises, job loss, natural disasters, and death to be unrelated happenings. Preachers need to demonstrate to their listeners how the narrative of canonical apocalyptic literature is *their* narrative. This means postmodern preachers need to take time to craft clear applications. The average postmodern Christian is not living in exile, or seeking to rebuild a destroyed civilization, or facing imprisonment for their faith. Therefore, preachers need to identify the circumstances in the lives of their hearers where the narrative of canonical apocalyptic literature applies.

Like the original narration of the experience of the vision recipient, postmodern hearers need a tether that links the visions they are reading with their real life circumstances. The preacher needs to provide that tether. For example, people may not be walking around with the name of the beast tattooed on their foreheads, but people are worshipping the beast today. The preacher needs to explain how worshipping the idols of money or reputation or food is actually bowing down to the beast. People may not be mourning the destruction of the temple, but they are mourning significant loss in their

lives. The preacher needs to explain how the hope of the new Jerusalem helps to provide comfort in times of loss and despair. The narrative provided in canonical apocalyptic literature puts the temporal circumstances of the postmodern listener in the context of the transcendent world of the apocalyptic vision. If people struggle in general to apply the Bible to their lives, they will need extra help in applying canonical apocalyptic texts.

### **Further Research**

Two general areas of further study come to light as a result of this project: hermeneutics and homiletics. In the arena of hermeneutics there are at least two areas that need further research. The first is the difference between canonical and non-canonical apocalyptic texts given the doctrine of inspiration. Does the Spirit use pseudepigrapha as a literary form? Is that concept consistent with the truthfulness of God? Also, if the prophetic visions of canonical apocalyptic literature did not actually happen—if they were imagined—do they lose their divine authority for both their original and contemporary audiences?

The second area of research in hermeneutics that would benefit from further study in light of this project is the futurist interpretation of prophecy and its relation to orthodoxy. Some Christian interpreters do not hold to any form of a futurist interpretation of apocalyptic literature. By this I mean they do not believe that Christ will literally return, or that creation will be renewed, but rather than canonical apocalyptic literature provides an inspirational vision that will not correspond to a

literal, future reality. Is the future reality of the resurrection and establishment of God's kingdom on earth a necessary belief of Christian orthodoxy? This question needs to be considered in light of the doctrine of inspiration and prophecy.

This project brings to light three areas in need of further research in the arena of homiletics. The first is a study of the postmodern perception of canonical apocalyptic literature. How do postmoderns view apocalyptic literature? How does that impact preaching apocalyptic texts?

The second area of homiletics that needs further research is effective methods for preaching apocalyptic literature. What are effective preaching methods for communicating apocalyptic texts to postmoderns? How helpful are visuals like pictures, sketches, and videos? How does the current problem of low Bible literacy impact preaching these texts?

The third area of homiletics that needs further research is the postmodern attitude about hope. How do postmoderns conceive on the concept of hope? How does that relate to their interpretation of canonical apocalyptic literature? What are the implications of the postmodern perspective on hope for preaching?

## **Conclusion**

*I have sought to demonstrate that canonical apocalyptic literature restores the lost meta-narrative in postmodern culture by providing a visionary representation of future victory for the people of God anchored in the narrated experience of the vision recipient. Postmodern people need to appropriate the message of canonical apocalyptic*

literature for themselves to combat the hopelessness that results from a paratactic view of life. As one focus group participant stated, “Ultimately we know the dragon has been defeated.” That narrative matters not just tomorrow, but today.

## APPENDIX A

### PHILOSOPHER TIMELINE

#### Rene Descartes

1596-1650

Descartes sought to prove God exists, started only with human reason. Father of rationalism and modernism. He is considered the start of the **Enlightenment**. He held to a subject/object distinction.

#### Jean Jacques Rousseau

1712-1778

Rousseau fought to maintain freedom. He looked for the “Bohemian ideal”—no restraints. He hated science, and thus hated reason. For Rousseau, the individual is the center of the universe and self-expression is highest ideal.

#### Schaeffer's line of despair

#### Hegel

1770-1831

Hegel moved away from thesis-antithesis to **thesis-synthesis**. He emphasized dialectical thinking. He was still an idealist, and thought synthesis was achievable through reason.

#### Friedrick Nietzsche

1844-1900

Nietzsche articulated **nihilism**: there is no meaning, God is dead, and relativism reigns.

#### John Locke

1632-1704

Locke held that reason is the basis for faith.

#### Immanuel Kant

1724-1804

For Kant, rationalism was firmly entrenched. Life is the struggle of nature vs. freedom. He did not believe in divine revelation. For Kant, determinism emerges (nature without freedom). The world is product of experience as processed by categories.

#### Soren Kierkegaard

1813-1855

Kierkegaard held that synthesis was not achievable by reason, but by a **leap of faith**. This resulted in the separation of faith from rationality, reason, and logic.

Thus existential experience is the only guide to purpose, significance, meaning in life. There is no “uniform field of knowledge.”

#### Paul Tillich

1886-1965

Tillich espoused the new mysticism- all knowledge concerning God is dead, any concept of a personal God is dead, therefore God is dead.

When asked, “do you pray?” he answered, “No, but I meditate.”

## Martin Heidegger

1889-1976

Early Heidegger was a true existentialist. Authentication came from **angst**, the feeling of dread.

Older Heidegger (after 70) changed his view: being is there, makes itself known, via language. There is a speaking which exists. That is all. Listen to the poet, but content is immaterial. He had blind hope that there is something more to life.

## Jean-François Lyotard

1924-1998

Lyotard defined postmodernism as “incredulity towards metanarratives.” We must “tolerate the incommensurable.”

## Jacques Derrida

1930-2004

Derrida championed deconstruction—an “attempt to expose and undermine the binary oppositions, hierarchies, and paradoxes on which particular texts, philosophical and otherwise, are founded.”

## Jean-Paul Sartre & Albert Camus

1909-1980 and 1913-1960, respectively.

Sartre and Camus held to **nihilism**- we live in an absurd universe. Will is what matters. Just act, there is no morality.

In Camus' *The Plague* the choice is either side with people against God or side with God against people.

For Sartre the philosophical problem is that something exists. Rationally, the universe is absurd, therefore you have to **authenticate yourself** by an act of will.

## Michel Foucault

1926-1984

From Schaeffer: “Foucault’s *Against the Authority of Reason* represents an important tendency in advanced contemporary thought. In his despair of the transcendent powers of rational intellect he embodies one abiding truth of our time- the failure of the nineteenth century to make good its promises.”

## Richard Rorty

1931-2007

Rorty abandoned representationalist accounts of traditional epistemology. He viewed Western philosophy as one story among many. According to Vanhoozer, Rorty held that “epistemology is a way of getting through the night.”

## APPENDIX B

### SERMONS ON REVELATION 12:1-13:18

#### **Revelation 12:1-17<sup>1</sup>**

#### **We Are at War**

All throughout Revelation God has been telling the church, through John, to be ready to suffer, to not compromise with our culture. He has called us to be ready to die, if necessary. The entire book presupposes a time of great suffering for the church—present and especially future. But why must we suffer?

This is a powerful question, and one that has driven Western culture from incredible optimism about humanity's ability to rectify evil to a cold, indifferent acknowledgment: evil exists. There is no grand story or purpose for it. It just happens. So when the Islamic fundamentalist beheads a Christian or when the cancer cells can't be stopped, we simply shrug our shoulders and say, "sometimes things just happen."

What if they don't? What if everything that happens is part of a greater narrative, a grand story of the universe? What if there really is a struggle between good and evil that is beyond us and yet impacts us? It was the Apostle Paul who said, "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

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<sup>1</sup> These messages were delivered in a Wednesday night Bible study format. There was time given at the end for discussion and questions.



Tonight we will learn from Revelation 12 that we are at war. Make no mistake. Sometimes we are so spoiled that we forget it. Other times we are all too aware that we have an enemy who is crafty, deceitful, and angry. Find your way to Revelation 12:1-17, and together we'll learn a crucial truth about this war we face every day.

As we came through Revelation chapter 11 we are anticipating the final judgment, but there are more interludes to come. Some scholars call Revelation 12-14 the seven signs in delay before John is shown the seven bowls of judgment. We will walk through these seven signs together, recognizing that some of these signs summarize big chunks of history while others look to the future.

We read in Revelation 12:1-2, "And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth." In apocalyptic literature the messenger, here John, is often given symbolic visions. Here the vision is described as symbolic. First we are told about a pregnant woman crowned with twelve stars, shining with celestial light.

The woman in the vision has two primary Old Testament referents that indicate she is a symbol of the Messianic community. First, this woman reflects Eve, the mother of humanity. The context includes references to Genesis 3 with a serpent, and the conflict between the seed of Eve and the serpent. Possibly the sun and moon imagery is meant to communicate her glory as the mother of humanity. The twelve stars are probably representative of the twelve tribes of Israel. The idea is that from Eve comes the messianic community—both those looking forward to the Messiah, Israel, and those

who would believe in him after his arrival, the church. Second, this woman is also informed by Israel as the producer of the Messiah. In Isaiah 66:7-9 Israel is depicted as a mother, giving birth to the Messiah. This is exactly what we see happening in the vision. The Messiah, the good guy, is about to be born. If we have a good guy, we need a bad guy. Look to Revelation 12:3-4.

“And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth.” The woman is about to give birth, and then we see this dragon. Virtually every ancient near eastern cultural had some kind of mythology about serpents. There’s a Canaanite tale about a seven headed serpent, just like we have here. In ancient Greek mythology there’s a story about a python who tries to kill Apollo before he’s born—very similar to what we see here. The Spirit gives John this vision as a play on the serpent theme, and as a corrective. This is really what’s going on with the serpent.

You’ll notice this dragon has seven heads and ten horns. The ten horns are a reference to the book of Daniel, where the horns are rulers. We’re not sure about whether each head has seven diadems or there’s one for each head. One way or another, he has a might tail that sweeps down a third of the stars of heaven. The stars are either angels who fell with Satan (there may be some connection here with Daniel again), or they’re just stars. In either case, the point of the image is to communicate the power of the dragon. We’ve now met the bad guy. Look next at what he is trying to do at the end of verse 4.

“And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it.” This is like a horror movie. A giant red dragon wants to eat this newborn baby. The image is grotesque. The baby is the Messiah, and the dragon is his enemy

Note verses five and six. “She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days.” She gives birth to the child, and then John quotes from Psalm 2:9, a Messianic Psalm. Verse 5 describes Jesus’ birth. We have no reference to his life or ministry, only a reference to his ascension. This is a brief summary of the Messiah’s ministry. He’s born, and goes safely to heaven. The dragon doesn’t get him.

While the Messiah was safe, the woman had to flee into the wilderness. Because of the Exodus of Israel in the Old Testament, the wilderness is both a place of spiritual intimacy with God and a place of trial and testing. The two often go hand in hand. She is protected by God from the dragon in the wilderness for three and a half years. That timeframe comes from the book of Daniel, and probably indicates a short period of trial and testing. Let’s pause right here.

Part of the benefit of apocalyptic revelations is they are hard to forget. This is a vivid vision! The dragon tries to eat this baby, and the baby ascends to heaven and the mother flees to the wilderness. We will find out shortly that the dragon is, of course, Satan. This vision depicts Satan raging against the work of the Messiah. Satan tried to

thwart Jesus' ministry is several ways. The primary allusion is probably to the slaughter of the innocents from Matthew. Satan also tempted Jesus after his baptism, and incite Judas into betraying Jesus which resulted in his crucifixion. Satan was constantly trying to undo the work of Jesus and thwart his mission.

This may not be new information, but too often we forget about this conflict. It's not just a past conflict, it's a present conflict. Satan hates Jesus and the church. Here the curtain is pulled back on the spiritual struggle going on. Our challenge is we live in America and enjoy religious freedom. We might be tempted to forget that Satan hates us and Jesus, and is actively seeking to destroy Jesus' work. Though we are at peace, we are not at peace. Don't assume that because we have freedom of religion (for now) that Satan will leave us alone.

This puts the context of our suffering in the light of a much greater spiritual reality. This is a panned out view of the epic conflict between good and evil. There's a big time war going on. The question still remains: why is Satan so against the Messiah and his church? We see the answer in the next part of the text. Look to verse seven.

“Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

Is this a vision of a past battle in heaven, is it a future battle that will happen at the end times, or is it a symbolic battle representing Satan's defeat by virtue of the

cross. The point doesn't change much, but those are the options. Satan is called here "that ancient serpent" which is a direct link to Genesis 3. He also called the accuser and the deceiver of the whole world. This is the nature of Satan's warfare.

Michael and his angelic army defeat Satan, and heaven rejoices. "And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, 'Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!'" Probably the martyrs in heaven are signing this song of worship and victory due to the victory over Satan through the blood of the Lamb.

The Lamb imagery is ironic. The Lamb is not the symbol of a warrior, but of a sacrifice. The dragon comes with power and strength trying to destroy the Messiah. The Messiah defeats him not by strength, but by humility and a sacrificial death. This is the core idea of the vision. Our victory over Satan is through the Lamb. Also, our victory does not come through power or might, but through humble faith and witness—even to the point of martyrdom. Satan, sin, evil, rebellion against God, these are all defeated in the cross of Christ. This victory, however, does not mean that the rest of our days are without suffering. Note Revelation 12:13-14.

“And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time.” Post-cross the woman is the believing community—Jews and Gentiles—the church. The woman’s eagle’s wings is an allusion to the Exodus as God rescued Israel and bore them out of Egypt on eagle’s wings. The time frame, whether it is literal or symbolic, indicates that Satan’s rage against the church is for a limited time only. He has already been defeated.

Note verses fifteen to seventeen. “The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with a flood. But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea.” Believers in Jesus are the descendants of the woman. That’s you and me. We are in this text. Satan will try and destroy the church, but he cannot be successful. Our victory over Satan by the Lamb means his rage is in vain. After the cross, Satan’s rage intensified. Yet his rage is futile.

As we see in passages like 2 Cor 10:3-6 and Eph 6:10-20, Satan attacks our faith, our beliefs, our worldview and philosophy. He wants us to refuse to believe that he exists, and that he is raging. Our victory over Satan by the Lamb means his rage is

in vain. We may suffer his attacks, but he cannot defeat us. We may even die, but because of the Lamb we are still victorious. Therefore, we need to be ready to endure Satan's attacks. While Satan is a finite being, he and his demons are on the attack, raging against us. Our victory over Satan by the Lamb means his rage is in vain.

Back in World War II, operation Overlord was the Allied offensive that began with Normandy landings. Once operation Overlord had begun, the war was on the way to conclusion. Germany would be defeated a year later.

Even so, it would be within that year that the allies would suffer their greatest number of casualties. Although the Germans were effectively defeated by the fall of 1944, in December they launched a major counter-offensive in Belgium, France, and Luxembourg. The allies were caught off guard, and their lines "bulged" eastward, hence the title "battle of the bulge." This counter offensive was defeated, and yet it showed how careful the allies had to be.

When we suffer, when we are persecuted, we need to remember that it is part of the grand story of history. Christ has defeated Satan, our role is to walk by faith regardless of his raging. The church's victory is secure. Our victory over Satan by the Lamb means his rage is in vain.

## **Revelation 13:1-10**

### **When It Doesn't Get Better**

When we last left off, John had seen a vision where Satan was thrown down to earth and was raging against the woman and her descendants: Christians. This epic tale explains the temporary existence of persecution and suffering. Satan, although defeated by the blood of the Lamb, is raging... against us.

But how does Satan rage against the church? Before we get too far down the road of horror movies, we need to realize that Satan's strategies are deceptive and very effective. They are only obvious in apocalyptic visions. Tonight we will answer that question. But knowing the answer isn't enough. Once we know, we then have something to do. Find your way to Revelation 13:1-10.

Revelation 13:1, "And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads." In Daniel 7:3 he also has a vision of beasts, and his four beasts rose up out of the sea. In ancient near eastern cultures the sea was considered a source of chaos and evil. This doesn't contradict 11:7 where the beast comes out the Abyss, rather it is simply a visionary representation of the evil nature of the beast. This beast has ten horns and seven heads. The fourth beast of Daniel 7:7 had ten horns signifying ten rulers. In Revelation 17:10 the seven heads are seven kings. The seven heads relate to the seven headed dragon of chapter twelve. The blasphemous names probably refers to the "increasing tendency of the Roman emperors to assume titles of deity" (Mounce, 245).



It is very likely that John would associate this beast with the Roman empire. The spirit of the best will culminate in a final expression, warping religious belief into self-worship. It is very likely that this government will indeed be ruled ultimately by the anti-Christ. However, the beast himself may stand simultaneously for the kingdom and its kings (seven heads).

Let's keep going. This beast is not only powerful, but terrifying. Look to verse two, "And the beast that I saw was like a leopard; its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority." This beast is a merging of the four beasts of Daniel: Lion, bear, leopard, and horned beast. Thus, this will be the sum of all evils. The power and authority of this beast are granted by Satan.

This beast will also have a miraculous, supernatural aura to it. Note verse three, "One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast." One of the rulers (horns) seemed to have been killed by the sword (13:14), however, he survived or came back to life. Options for this in John's lifetime are: Caligula who was sick and recovered, or Nero, who killed himself but there were rumors that he would come back, or faked his death. This beast could also stand for the Roman empire itself that had periods of decline and resurgence. Some take this as a reference to the defeat of Satan at the cross—he continues to fight even though he has been defeated. One way or another, the result of this miraculous recovery is the marveling of the earth at the beast.

“And they worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, ‘Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?’”

Worshipping the beast goes hand in hand with worshipping the dragon. This seems to imply an acknowledgement of the source of the beast’s power and authority. The phrase “Who is like the beast” is an ironic twist on “Who is like the Lord” from Mic 7:18.

This passage reveals confused worship as a primary strategy of Satan. Worship means to attribute ultimate value or worth to something or someone. Satan rages against the church through worship of authority. Government, kingdoms, and politics are front and center in our world. People believe that our ultimate solutions will come from government.

Thus you can have, simultaneously: ISIS- belief in orderly, religious, Islamic gov’t with a strong hand; Ethnic cleansing: tribes in Africa warring for control of power; Democracy: people who believe the solution to the world’s problems is democracy; and Leader worship: this man/woman will save us. In all of these circumstances there is one common denominator: worship of authority. The dragon laughs as people worship the beast, because they are not worshipping the Lamb. The dragon wants us to worship anything other than the Lamb. His agenda, although often deceptive, is not hidden.

Note Rev 13:5, “And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months.”

For three and a half years the beast is given time to blaspheme (the same time period as in Dan 7:25). Who gave him this time? The passive voice of “it was allowed” is a reference to God. It is God who is sovereign, and grants rulers authority.

What will this beast do with his authority? “It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven.” How are those who dwell in heaven God’s dwelling? The idea is probably guilt by association- to blaspheme God is to blaspheme his church and vice versa.

John goes on in verse seven. “Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation.” The war on the saints is also mentioned in Dan7:21. This beast uses his worldwide authority to attack the church in every nation. The faithful will lose their lives to the beast rather than renounce Christ.

There are two clear sides to this conflict, “and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain.” As in other places in Revelation, the phrase those “who dwell on the earth” refers to unbelievers on earth. Believers are explicitly mentioned as the exception. The book of life is referenced in a few places, including Deut 32:32-33, Phil 4:3. This book includes the names of all those who put their faith in the Messiah, and it belongs to the Lamb. That the names were written before the foundation of the world emphasizes God’s sovereignty over even their suffering.

It is also possible, and perhaps preferable, that “before the foundation of the world” modifies “the Lamb who was slain.” In this case the idea would be that the “death of Christ was a redemptive sacrifice decreed in the counsels of eternity.”

John goes on in Rev 13:9-10, “If anyone has an ear, let him hear: If anyone is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if anyone is to be slain with the sword, with the sword must he be slain. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.”

This poem refers to those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life. They will refuse to worship the beast, and will be taken captive. They will furthermore be killed by the sword. This is not outside of God’s control, but within his plan for final judgment. Thus the saints are exhorted to persevere and believe in the midst of such incredible trials.

This vision displays the way Satan uses this beast to attack followers of Jesus. Christians must be ready in trials to endure and believe. Even though marriage will be redefined, Islam will be exalted, political correctness and the new tolerance will be championed. Christians will be executed. It’s all one systematic attack. We have to be ready. Are you?

Will we endure? I’m thinking of football “two a day” practices. It’s so hard, I have to convince myself to keep going because I really want to quit. We have to recognize our trials are part of this greater battle. Thus we bear them. Christians must be ready in trials to endure and believe. We face many threats to endurance: compromise, love of comfort, laziness. Will we believe?

Satan has been defeated. His days of authority are numbered. His current rage and reign is temporary. We may be killed, but we will rise again. We also face many threats to faith: false belief, ignorance of Satan’s schemes, lack of grounding in God’s

Word, isolation from the church. Christians must be ready in trials to endure and believe. There's something much bigger going on.

I really enjoy JRR Tolkien's LOTR trilogy. In a fantasy world of his own making he envisions Hobbits- a race of short, hilarious little people, totally absorbed with their families, jobs, farms, etc. All the while the world around them is literally in peril as evil seeks to take over everything. A few hobbits must learn to look far beyond the shire. They must travel where they have never dared. They must fight battles they cannot win, because it is good versus evil.

Too many Christians live in Shire and have no idea what is going on all around us. We've got to wake up. We must be ready in trials to endure and believe. Here is a call for the endurance of the saints. Christians must be ready in trials to endure and believe.

## **Revelation 13:11-18**

### **Watch Out for Fake Lambs**

Deception is a staple of many science fiction novels: convince people they aren't slaves, that they aren't a part of a system of deceit. The greatest trick of the Matrix was the people didn't know they were in the Matrix.

This isn't just science fiction. It is one of Satan's primary strategies to prevent people from worshipping the Lamb: convince them to worship something else, but prevent them from noticing. We are exposed every day to Satan's systematic attacks. While we'd love to think that we'd never worship the beast, the fact is that Satan's strategy is to deceive us when that's exactly what we're doing. This is the work of the second beast in Revelation 13. Let's find our way to Revelation 13:11.

We read in verses 11-12, "Then I saw another beast rising out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. It exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence, and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed." The first beast came out of the sea, this second beast came from the earth. The point here is probably that this beast complements the work of the first beast.

John goes on in verses thirteen through fifteen, "It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in front of people, and by the signs that it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast it deceives those who dwell on earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that was wounded by the sword and yet lived. And it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of

the beast might even speak and might cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain.”

In 2 Thess 2:9-10 we read about the anti-Christ who will display signs and wonders. These are deception, they are false miracles. Satanic power is behind these genuine supernatural occurrences. The fire coming down from heaven is not fire of judgment, but a pseudo-sign.

Thus, this second beast facilitates worship of the first beast through false miracles. In the first century, the connection between government and religion would have been clear. The Roman empire wasn't just government. As emperors came and went, an imperial religion developed. Emperors started referring to themselves as sons of god. Temples were built, liturgies were created, holidays established. In fact, if you didn't participate in such events often you were ostracized, refused participation in the market, and even the death penalty!

So we have in Revelation 12-13 the “unholy trinity” of the dragon and two beasts. Note that the second beast convinces the world to worship the first beast. False worship is often deceptively plausible. The first beast is loud and blasphemous, the second is smooth and convincing. If the first beast is the imperial power of kingdoms, the second is the religious assumptions that go along with those kingdoms. These vary from culture to culture, but they are strong forces. In John's day it was the imperial cult. In our day, it's the new tolerance, it's Mormonism, Jehovah's Witness, it's RCC and worship of Mary and the saints, in evangelical churches it's the worship of money in prosperity gospel.

So often Satan doesn't want to scare you, he wants to deceive you. What better deception than to think you are worshipping the Lamb when in reality you are not! Make no mistake, although smooth and deceptive, this false worship is just that.

The second beast draws a line in the sand. Look to verses sixteen to eighteen, "Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. This calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666."

The sealing of worshippers of the beast is a parody of God's sealing of believers in Rev 7:3. This is probably not literal, especially given the identity of the beast in verse 18 as an individual. Mounce said this sealing "symbolizes unqualified allegiance to the demands of the imperial cult." Interestingly, the word for mark here means stamp or imprint. This word is used for the stamp on a coin and also for seals with the emperor's name and the date affixed to commercial documents.

The second beast creates culture wide peer pressure. Refusal to worship the beast is career impacting. In the first century Roman empire it meant refusal of participation in certain aspects of the economy. Today we would think of the removal of tax-free status of churches as punishment by the government.

Who is the first beast who's number is 666? Many ancient cultures used letters as numbers as well. Thus words could also have a numeric value, depending on how the numbers were calculated. This is called gematria. In Pompei, for example,



archaeologists found graffiti that reads, "I love her whose number is 545." John thought that given the number 666, his readers would be able to figure out the name of this particular emperor who was representative of the first beast. The best candidate is Nero, but we don't know for sure.

What we do know, is worship is the issue. Note in the passage how those who refuse to worship the beast stand out. They will only worship the Lamb, no matter what the consequences are. Worship of the true Lamb is the antidote for false worship, and it stands out.

We must know the Lamb. Know his voice. Cling to his word. We need to be ready to stand out. Consider the commitment to remain a virgin until married. Today this is mocked in mainstream media and entertainment. At best it is considered quaint. Will we worship the Lamb or the beast? Our temptation is going to be to go with the flow. If we do, we'll end up worshipping the beast. Worship of the true Lamb is the antidote for false worship, and it stands out.

Throughout the years there have been many attempts to identify *the* anti-Christ: Nero, Constantius (another emperor who persecuted Xians, 4th century), Pope Leo X, Napoleon, Hitler, JFK (666 votes at Democratic convention), Henry Kissinger, Gorbachev- the mark, Pope John Paul II- gunshot, Reagan (Ronald Wilson Reagan, 6 letters in each name, plus recovered from a gunshot), Barney the Dinosaur, Barack Obama (Illinois Pick 3 lottery #s were 666 day after election in 2008), Bill Gates, and the WWW (Hebrew waw), and the list goes on.

Who is the beast? Who is the antiChrist? We don't know yet, but we do know from 2 John 1:7 and 1 John 2:22 that many antiChrists are in the world. These beasts will ultimately culminate in one ruler- the antiChrist of 1 & 2 John and the "man of lawlessness" from 2 Thess 2. In the meantime, we deal with antiChrists. Worship of the true Lamb is the antidote for false worship, and it stands out.

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## VITA

Full Name: Ryan Michael Boys

Date and Place of Birth: 1978, Nashville, TN

Education/Degrees: Bachelor of Science in Bible Exposition, Master of Arts in Biblical

Exegesis and Linguistics

Years of D.Min. work: 2012-2015

Expected Graduation: May 9, 2015

Spouse: Lindsay Diane Boys

Children: Jackson Ryan, Kate Abigail, Samuel Harrison, Jane Elizabeth

Current Position: Senior Pastor, Green Pond Bible Chapel, Rockaway, NJ